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ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

VOL. XI

THE WRONG BOX
THE EBB TIDE

A CERTAIN DISMAL SOMETHING . . . TOPPLED TO ONE SIDE AND HEAVILY COLLAPSED

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THE NOVELS AND TALES OF ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

THE WRONG BOX
THE EBB TIDE

PUBLISHED IN
NEW YORK BY
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SONS 1919

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A TRIO AND QUARTETTE

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PREFACE

"NOTHING like a little judicious levity," says Michael Finsbury in the text: nor can any better excuse be found for the volume in the reader's hand. The authors can but add that one of them is old enough to be ashamed of himself, and the other young enough to learn better.

R. L. S.
L. O.

THE WRONG BOX

WRITTEN IN COLLABORATION WITH LLOYD OSBOURNE

THE WRONG BOX

CHAPTER I

IN WHICH MORRIS SUSPECTS

HOW very little does the amateur, dwelling at home at ease, comprehend the labours and perils of the author, and, when he smilingly skims the surface of a work of fiction, how little does he consider the hours of toil, consultation of authorities, researches in the Bodleian, correspondence with learned and illegible Germans — in one word, the vast scaffolding that was first built up and then knocked down, to while away an hour for him in a railway train! Thus I might begin this tale with a biography of Tonti — birthplace, parentage, genius probably inherited from his mother, remarkable instance of precocity, etc.— and a complete treatise on the system to which he bequeathed his name. The material is all beside me in a pigeon-hole, but I scorn to appear vainglorious. Tonti is dead, and I never saw anyone who even pretended to regret him; and as for the tontine system, a word will suffice for all the purposes of this unvarnished narrative.

A number of sprightly youths (the more the merrier) put up a certain sum of money, which is then funded in a pool under trustees; coming on for a century later, the proceeds are fluttered for a moment in the face of the last survivor, who is probably deaf, so that he cannot even hear of his success — and who is certainly dying, so that he might just as well have lost. The peculiar poetry and even humour of the scheme is now apparent, since it is one by which nobody concerned can possibly profit; but its fine, sportsmanlike character endeared it to our grandparents.

When Joseph Finsbury and his brother Masterman were little lads in white-frilled trousers, their father — a well-to-do merchant in Cheapside — caused them to join a small but rich tontine of seven and thirty lives. A thousand pounds was the entrance fee; and Joseph Finsbury can remember to this day the visit to the lawyer's, where the members of the tontine — all children like himself — were assembled together and sat in turn in the big office-chair, and signed their names with the assistance of a kind old gentleman in spectacles and Wellington boots. He remembers playing with the children afterward on the lawn at the back of the lawyer's house, and a battle royal that he had with a brother tontiner, who had kicked his shins. The sound of war called forth the lawyer from where he was dispensing cake and wine to the assembled parents in the office, and the combatants were separated, and Joseph's spirit (for he was the smaller of the two) commended by the gentleman in the Wellington boots, who vowed he had been just such another at the same age. Joseph wondered to himself if he had worn at that time little Wellingtons and a little bald head, and when (in bed at night) he grew tired of telling himself stories of sea-fights, he used to dress himself up as the old gentleman, and entertain other little boys and girls with cake and wine.

In the year 1840 the thirty-seven were all alive; in 1850 their number had decreased by six; in 1856 and 1857 business was more lively, for the Crimea and the Mutiny carried off no less than nine. There remained in 1870 but five of the original members, and at the date of my story, including the two Finsburys, but three.

By this time Masterman was in his seventy-third year; he had long complained of the effects of age, had long since retired from business, and now lived in absolute seclusion under the roof of his son Michael, the well-known solicitor. Joseph, on the other hand, was still up and about, and still presented but a semi-venerable figure on the streets in which he loved to wander. This was the more to be deplored, because Masterman had led (even to the least particular) a model British life. Industry, regularity, respectability, and a preference for the four per cents. are understood to be the very foundations of a green old age. All these Masterman had eminently displayed, and here he was, *ab agendo,* at seventy-three; while Joseph, barely two years younger, and in the most excellent preservation, had disgraced himself through life by idleness and eccentricity. Embarked in the leather trade, he had early wearied of business, for which he was supposed to have small parts. A taste for general information, not promptly checked, had soon begun to sap his manhood. There is no passion more debilitating to the mind, unless, perhaps, it be that itch of public speaking which it not infrequently accompanies or begets. The two were conjoined in the case of Joseph; the acute stage of this double malady, that in which the patient delivers gratuitous lectures, soon declared itself with severity, and not many years had passed over his head before he would have travelled thirty miles to address an infant-school. He was no student; his reading was confined to elementary text-books and the daily papers; he did not even fly as high as cyclopædias; life, he would say, was his volume. His lectures were not meant (he would declare) for college professors; they were addressed direct to "the great heart of the people," and the heart of the people must certainly be sounder than its head, for his lucubrations were received with favour. That entitled, "How to Live Cheerfully on Forty Pounds a Year," created a sensation among the unemployed. "Education: Its Aims, Objects, Purposes, and Desirability," gained him the respect of the shallow-minded. As for his celebrated essay on "Life Insurance Regarded in its Relation to the Masses," read before the Working Men's Mutual Improvement Society, Isle of Dogs, it was received with a "literal ovation" by an unintelligent audience of both sexes. And so marked was the effect that he was next year elected honorary president of the institution, an office of less than no emolument, since the holder was expected to come down with a donation, but one which highly satisfied his self-esteem.

While Joseph was thus building himself up a reputation among the more cultivated portion of the ignorant, his domestic life was suddenly overwhelmed by orphans. The death of his younger brother Jacob saddled him with the charge of two boys, Morris and John; and in the course of the same year his family was still further swelled by the addition of a little girl, the daughter of John Henry Hazeltine, Esq., a gentleman of small property and fewer friends. He had met Joseph only once, at a lecture-hall in Holloway; but from that formative experience he returned home to make a new will, and consign his daughter and her fortune to the lecturer. Joseph had a kindly disposition; and yet it was not without reluctance that he accepted this new responsibility, advertised for a nurse, and purchased a second-hand perambulator. Morris and John he made more readily welcome; not so much because of the tie of consanguinity as because the leather business (in which he hastened to invest their fortune of thirty thousand pounds) had recently exhibited inexplicable symptoms of decline. A young but capable Scot was chosen as manager to the enterprise, and the cares of business never again afflicted Joseph Finsbury. Leaving his charges in the hands of the capable Scot (who was married), he began his extensive travels on the Continent and in Asia Minor.

With a polyglot Testament in one hand and a phrase-book in the other, he groped his way among the speakers of eleven European languages. The first of these guides is hardly applicable to the purposes of the philosophic traveller, and even the second is designed more expressly for the tourist than for the expert in life. But he pressed interpreters into his service — whenever he could get their services for nothing — and by one means and another filled many note-books with the results of his researches.

In these wanderings he spent several years, and only returned to England when the increasing age of his charges needed his attention. The two lads had been placed in a good but economical school, where they had received a sound commercial education; which was somewhat awkward, as the leather business was by no means in a state to court inquiry. In fact, when Joseph went over his accounts preparatory to surrendering his trust, he was dismayed to discover that his brother's fortune had not increased by his stewardship; even by making over to his two wards every penny he had in the world, there would still be a deficit of seven thousand eight hundred pounds. When these facts were communicated to the two brothers in the presence of a lawyer, Morris Finsbury threatened his uncle with all the terrors of the law, and was only prevented from taking extreme steps by the advice of the professional man.

"You cannot get blood from a stone," observed the lawyer.

And Morris saw the point, and came to terms with his uncle. On the one side, Joseph gave up all that he possessed and assigned to his nephew his contingent interest in the tontine, already quite a hopeful speculation. On the other, Morris agreed to harbour his uncle and Miss Hazeltine (who had come to grief with the rest), and to pay to each of them one pound a month as pocket-money. The allowance was amply sufficient for the old man; it scarce appears how Miss Hazeltine contrived to dress upon it; but she did, and what is more she never complained. She was, indeed, sincerely attached to her incompetent guardian. He had never been unkind; his age spoke for him loudly; there was something appealing in his whole-souled quest of knowledge and innocent delight in the smallest mark of admiration; and though the lawyer had warned her she was being sacrificed, Julia had refused to add to the perplexities of Uncle Joseph.

In a large, dreary house in John Street, Bloomsbury, these four dwelt together; a family in appearance, in reality a financial association. Julia and Uncle Joseph were, of course, slaves; John, a gentleman with a taste for the banjo, the music-hall, the Gaiety bar, and the sporting papers, must have been anywhere a secondary figure; and the cares and delights of empire devolved entirely upon Morris. That these are inextricably intermixed is one of the commonplaces with which the bland essayist consoles the incompetent and the obscure, but in the case of Morris the bitter must have largely outweighed the sweet. He grudged no trouble to himself, he spared none to others; he called the servants in the morning, he served out the stores with his own hand, he took soundings of the sherry, he numbered the remainder biscuits; painful scenes took place over the weekly bills, and the cook was frequently impeached, and the tradespeople came and hectored with him in the back parlour, upon a question of three farthings. The superficial might have deemed him a miser; in his own eyes he was simply a man who had been defrauded; the world owed him seven thousand eight hundred pounds, and he intended that the world should pay.

But it was in his dealings with Joseph that Morris's character particularly shone. His uncle was a rather gambling stock in which he had invested heavily; and he spared no pains in nursing the security. The old man was seen monthly by a physician, whether he was well or ill. His diet, his raiment, his occasional outings, now to Brighton, now to Bournemouth, were doled out to him like pap to infants. In bad weather he must keep the house. In good weather, by half-past nine, he must be ready in the hall; Morris would see that he had gloves and that his shoes were sound; and the pair would start for the leather business arm in arm. The way there was probably dreary enough, for there was no pretence of friendly feeling; Morris had never ceased to upbraid his guardian with his defalcation and to lament the burthen of Miss Hazeltine; and Joseph, though he was a mild enough soul, regarded his nephew with something very near akin to hatred. But the way there was nothing to the journey back; for the mere sight of the place of business, as well as every detail of its transactions, was enough to poison life for any Finsbury.

Joseph's name was still over the door; it was he who still signed the cheques; but this was only policy on the part of Morris, and designed to discourage other members of the Tontine. In reality, the business was entirely his; and he found it an inheritance of sorrows. He tried to sell it, and the offers he received were quite derisory. He tried to extend it, and it was only the liabilities he succeeded in extending; to restrict it, and it was only the profits he managed to restrict. Nobody had ever made money out of that concern except the capable Scot, who retired (after his discharge) to the neighbourhood of Banff and built a castle with his profits. The memory of this fallacious Caledonian, Morris would revile daily, as he sat in the private office opening his mail, with old Joseph at another table, sullenly awaiting orders, or savagely affixing signatures to he knew not what. And when the man of the heather pushed cynicism so far as to send him the announcement of his second marriage (to Davida, eldest daughter of the Rev. Alexander McCraw) it was really supposed that Morris would have had a fit.

Business hours, in the Finsbury leather trade, had been cut to the quick; even Morris's strong sense of duty to himself was not strong enough to dally within those walls and under the shadow of that bankruptcy; and presently the manager and the clerks would draw a long breath, and compose themselves for another day of procrastination. Raw Haste, on the authority of my Lord Tennyson, is half-sister to Delay; but the Business Habits are certainly her uncles. Meanwhile, the leather-merchant would lead his living investment back to John Street like a puppy dog; and having there immured him in the hall, would depart for the day on the quest of seal rings, the only passion of his life. Joseph had more than the vanity of man, he had that of lecturers. He owned he was in fault; although more sinned against (by the capable Scot) than sinning; but had he steeped his hands in gore, he would still not deserve to be thus dragged at the chariot-wheels of a young man, to sit a captive in the halls of his own leather business, to be entertained with mortifying comments on his whole career — to have his costume examined, his collar pulled up, the presence of his mittens verified, and to be taken out and brought home in custody, like an infant with a nurse. At the thought of it his soul would swell with venom, and he would make haste to hang up his hat and coat and the detested mittens, and slink up-stairs to Julia and his note-books. The drawing-room at least was sacred from Morris; it belonged to the old man and the young girl; it was there that she made her dresses; it was there that he inked his spectacles over the registration of disconnected facts and the calculation of insignificant statistics.

Here he would sometimes lament his connection with the Tontine. "If it were not for that," he cried one afternoon, "he would not care to keep me. I might be a free man, Julia. And I could so easily support myself by giving lectures."

"To be sure you could," said she; "and I think it one of the meanest things he ever did to deprive you of that amusement. There were those nice people at the Isle of Cats (wasn't it?) who wrote and asked you so very kindly to give them an address. I did think he might have let you go to the Isle of Cats."

"He is a man of no intelligence," cried Joseph. "He lives here literally surrounded by the absorbing spectacle of life, and for all the good it does him, he might just as well be in his coffin. Think of his opportunities! The heart of any other young man would burn within him at the chance. The amount of information that I have it in my power to convey, if he would only listen, is a thing that beggars language, Julia."

"Whatever you do, my dear, you mustn't excite yourself," said Julia; "for you know, if you look at all ill, the doctor will be sent for."

"That is very true," returned the old man, humbly.

"I will compose myself with a little study." He thumbed his gallery of note-books. "I wonder," he said, "I wonder (since I see your hands are occupied) whether it might not interest you——"

"Why, of course it would," cried Julia. "Read me one of your nice stories, there's a dear!"

He had the volume down and his spectacles upon his nose instanter, as though to forestall some possible retractation. "What I propose to read to you," said he, skimming through the pages, "is the notes of a highly important conversation with a Dutch courier of the name of David Abbas, which is the Latin for abbot. Its results are well worth the money it cost me, for as Abbas at first appeared somewhat impatient, I was induced to (what is, I believe, singularly called) stand him drink. It runs only to about five and twenty pages. Yes, here it is." He cleared his throat, and began to read.

Mr. Finsbury (according to his own report) contributed about four hundred and ninety-nine five-hundredths of the interview, and elicited from Abbas literally nothing. It was dull for Julia, who did not require to listen; for the Dutch courier, who had to answer, it must have been a perfect nightmare. It would seem as if he had consoled himself by frequent applications to the bottle; it would even seem that (toward the end) he had ceased to depend on Joseph's frugal generosity, and called for the flagon on his own account. The effect, at least, of some mellowing influence was visible in the record: Abbas became suddenly a willing witness; he began to volunteer disclosures; and Julia had just looked up from her seam with something like a smile, when Morris burst into the house, eagerly calling for his uncle, and the next instant plunged into the room, waving in the air the evening paper.

It was indeed with great news that he came charged. The demise was announced of Lieutenant-General Sir Glascow Biggar, K.C.S.I., K.C.M.G., etc., and the prize of the tontine now lay between the Finsbury brothers. Here was Morris's opportunity at last. The brothers had never, it is true, been cordial. When word came that Joseph was in Asia Minor, Masterman had expressed himself with irritation. "I call it simply indecent," he had said. "Mark my words — we shall hear of him next at the North Pole." And these bitter expressions had been reported to the traveller on his return. What was worse, Masterman had refused to attend the lecture on "Education; its aims, objects, purpose, and desirability," although invited to the platform. Since then, the brothers had not met. On the other hand, they never had openly quarrelled; Joseph (by Morris's orders) was prepared to waive the advantage of his juniority; Masterman had enjoyed all through life the reputation of a man neither greedy nor unfair. Here, then, were all the elements of compromise assembled; and Morris, suddenly beholding his seven thousand eight hundred pounds restored to him, and himself dismissed from the vicissitudes of the leather trade, hastened the next morning to the office of his cousin Michael.

Michael was something of a public character. Launched upon the law at a very early age, and quite without protectors, he had become a trafficker in shady affairs. He was known to be the man for a lost cause, it was known he could extract testimony from a stone, and interest from a gold mine; and his office was besieged in consequence by all that numerous class of persons who have still some reputation to lose, and find themselves upon the point of losing it; by those who have made undesirable acquaintances, who have mislaid a compromising correspondence, or who are blackmailed by their own butlers. In private life, Michael was a man of pleasure; but it was thought his dire experience at the office had gone far to sober him, and it was known that (in the matter of investments) he preferred the solid to the brilliant. What was yet more to the purpose, he had been all his life a consistent scoffer at the Finsbury tontine.

It was therefore with little fear for the result that Morris presented himself before his cousin, and proceeded feverishly to set forth his scheme. For near upon a quarter of an hour, the lawyer suffered him to dwell upon its manifest advantages uninterrupted. Then Michael rose from his seat, and ringing for his clerk, uttered a single clause.

"It won't do, Morris."

It was in vain that the leather merchant pleaded and reasoned, and returned day after day to plead and reason. It was in vain that he offered a bonus of one thousand, of two thousand, of three thousand pounds; in vain that he offered, in Joseph's name, to be content with only one-third of the pool. Still there came the same answer: "It won't do."

"I can't see the bottom of this," he said at last. "You answer none of my arguments, you haven't a word to say. For my part, I believe it's malice."

The lawyer smiled at him benignly. "You may believe one thing," said he; "whatever else I do, I am not going to gratify any of your curiosity. You see I am a trifle more communicative to-day, because this is our last interview upon the subject."

"Our last interview!" cried Morris.

"The stirrup-cup, dear boy," returned Michael. "I can't have my business hours encroached upon. And by the by, have you no business of your own? Are there no convulsions in the leather trade?"

"I believe it to be malice," repeated Morris, doggedly. "You always hated and despised me from a boy."

"No, no—not hated," returned Michael, soothingly. "I rather like you than otherwise; there's such a permanent surprise about you, you look so dark and attractive from a distance. Do you know that to the naked eye you look romantic?—like what they call a man with a history. And indeed, from all that I can hear the history of the leather trade is full of incident."

"Yes," said Morris, disregarding these remarks, "it's no use coming here, I shall see your father."

"Oh, no, you won't," said Michael. "Nobody shall see my father."

"I should like to know why," cried his cousin.

"I never make any secret of that," replied the lawyer. "He is too ill."

"If he is as ill as you say," cried the other, "the more reason for accepting my proposal. I *will* see him."

"Will you?" said Michael, and he rose and rang for his clerk.

It was now the time, according to Sir Faraday Bond, the medical baronet whose name is so familiar at the foot of bulletins, that Joseph (the poor Golden Goose) should be removed into the purer air of Bournemouth; and for that uncharted wilderness of villas the family now shook off the dust of Bloomsbury: Julia delighted, because at Bournemouth she sometimes made acquaintances; John in despair, for he was a man of city tastes; Joseph indifferent where he was, so long as there was pen and ink and daily papers, and he could avoid martyrdom at the office; Morris himself, perhaps, not displeased to pretermit these visits to the city, and have a quiet time for thought. He was prepared for any sacrifice; all he desired was to get his money again and clear his feet of leather; and it would be strange, since he was so modest in his desires and the pool amounted to upward of a hundred and sixteen thousand pounds —it would be strange, indeed, if he could find no way of influencing Michael. "If I could only guess his reason," he repeated to himself; and by day, as he walked in Branksome woods, and by night, as he turned upon his bed, and at meal times, when he forgot to eat, and in the bathing machine, when he forgot to dress himself, that problem was constantly before him: why had Michael refused?

At last one night, he burst into his brother's room and woke him.

"What's all this?" asked John.

"Julia leaves this place to-morrow," replied Morris; "she must go up to town and get the house ready, and find servants. We shall all follow in three days."

"Oh, brayvo!" cried John. "But why?"

"I've found it out, John," returned his brother, gently.

"It? What?" inquired John.

"Why Michael won't compromise," said Morris. "It's because he can't. It's because Masterman's dead, and he's keeping it dark."

"Golly!" cried the impressionable John. "But what's the use? why does he do it, anyway?"

"To defraud us of the tontine," said his brother.

"He couldn't; you have to have a doctor's certificate," objected John.

"Did you never hear of venal doctors?" inquired Morris. "They're as common as blackberries; you can pick 'em up for three pound ten a head."

"I wouldn't do it under fifty if I were a sawbones," ejaculated John.

"And then, Michael," continued Morris, "is in the very thick of it. All his clients have come to grief; his whole business is rotten eggs. If any man could arrange it, he could; and depend upon it, he has his plan all straight; and depend upon it, it's a good one, for he's clever, and be damned to him! But I'm clever, too; and I'm desperate. I lost seven thousand eight hundred pounds when I was an orphan at school."

"Oh, don't be tedious," interrupted John. "You've lost far more already trying to get it back."

CHAPTER II

IN WHICH MORRIS TAKES ACTION

SOME days later, accordingly, the three males of this depressing family might have been observed (by a reader of G. P. R. James) taking their departure from the East Station of Bournemouth. The weather was raw and changeable, and Joseph was arrayed in consequence according to the principles of Sir Faraday Bond, a man no less strict (as is well known) on costume than on diet. There are few polite invalids who have not lived, or tried to live, by that punctilious physician's orders. "Avoid tea, madam," the reader has doubtless heard him say, "avoid tea, fried liver, antimonial wine, and bakers' bread. Retire nightly at 10.45; and clothe yourself (if you please) throughout in hygienic flannel. Externally, the fur of the marten is indicated. Do not forget to procure a pair of health boots at Messrs. Dall & Crumbie's." And he has probably called you back, even after you have paid your fee, to add with stentorian emphasis: "I had forgotten one caution: avoid kippered sturgeon, as you would the very devil!" The unfortunate Joseph was cut to the pattern of Sir Faraday in every button; he was shod with the health boot; his suit was of genuine ventilating cloth; his shirt of hygienic flannel, a somewhat dingy fabric; and he was draped to the knees in the inevitable great-coat of marten's fur. The very railway porters at Bournemouth (which was a favourite station of the doctor's) marked the old gentleman for a creature of Sir Faraday. There was but one evidence of personal taste, a vizarded forage-cap; from this form of headpiece, since he had fled from a dying jackal on the plains of Ephesus, and weathered a bora in the Adriatic, nothing could divorce our traveller.

The three Finsburys mounted into their compartment and fell immediately to quarrelling, a step unseemly in itself and (in this case) highly unfortunate for Morris. Had he lingered a moment longer by the window, this tale need never have been written. For he might then have observed (as the porters did not fail to do) the arrival of a second passenger in the uniform of Sir Faraday Bond. But he had other matters on hand which he judged (God knows how erroneously) to be more important.

"I never heard of such a thing," he cried, resuming a discussion which had scarcely ceased all morning. "The bill is not yours; it is mine."

"It is payable to me," returned the old gentleman, with an air of bitter obstinacy. "I will do what I please with my own property."

The bill was one for eight hundred pounds, which had been given him at breakfast to endorse, and which he had simply pocketed.

"Hear him, Johnny!" cried Morris. "His property! the very clothes upon his back belong to me."

"Let him alone," said John, "I'm sick of both of you."

"That is no way to speak of your uncle, sir," cried Joseph. "I will not endure this disrespect. You are a pair of exceedingly forward, impudent, and ignorant young men, and I have quite made up my mind to put an end to the whole business."

"Oh, skittles!" said the graceful John.

But Morris was not so easy in his mind. This unusual act of insubordination had already troubled him; and these mutinous words now sounded ominously in his ears. He looked at the old gentleman uneasily. Upon one occasion many years before, when Joseph was delivering a lecture, the audience had revolted in a body; finding their entertainer somewhat dry, they had taken the question of amusement into their own hands; and the lecturer (along with the board schoolmaster, the Baptist clergyman, and a working-man's candidate, who made up his bodyguard) was ultimately driven from the scene. Morris had not been present on that fatal day; if he had, he would have recognised a certain fighting glitter in his uncle's eye, and a certain chewing movement of his lips, as old acquaintances. But even to the inexpert these symptoms breathed of something dangerous.

"Well, well," said Morris. "I have no wish to bother you further till we get to London."

Joseph did not so much as look at him in answer; with tremulous hands he produced a copy of the *British Mechanic*, and ostentatiously buried himself in its perusal.

"I wonder what can make him so cantankerous?" reflected the nephew. "I don't like the look of it at all." And he dubiously scratched his nose.

The train travelled forth into the world, bearing along with it the customary freight of obliterated voyagers, and along with these old Joseph, affecting immersion in his paper, and John, slumbering over the columns of the *Pink Un,* and Morris, revolving in his mind a dozen grudges, and suspicions, and alarms. It passed Christ Church by the sea, Herne with its pinewoods, Ringwood on its mazy river. A little behind time, but not much for the South Western, it drew up at the platform of a station, in the midst of the New Forest, the real name of which (in case the railway company "might have the law of me") I shall veil under the alias of Browndean.

Many passengers put their heads to the window, and among the rest an old gentleman on whom I willingly dwell, for I am nearly done with him now, and (in the whole course of the present narrative) I am not in the least likely to meet another character so decent. His name is immaterial, not so his habits. He had passed his life wandering in a tweed suit on the continent of Europe; and years of *Galignani's Messenger* having at length undermined his eyesight, he suddenly remembered the rivers of Assyria and came to London to consult an oculist. From the oculist to the dentist, and from both to the physician, the step appears inevitable; presently he was in the hands of Sir Faraday, robed in ventilating cloth and sent to Bournemouth; and to that domineering baronet (who was his only friend upon his native soil) he was now returning to report. The case of these tweed-suited wanderers is unique. We have all seen them entering the table d'hôte (at Spezzia, or Grätz, or Venice) with a genteel melancholy and a faint appearance of having been to India and not succeeded; in the offices of many hundred hotels, they are known by name; and yet, if the whole of this wandering cohort were to disappear to-morrow, their absence would be wholly unremarked. How much more, if only one — say this one in the ventilating cloth — should vanish! He had paid his bills at Bournemouth; his worldly effects were all in the van in two portmanteaus, and these after the proper interval would be sold as unclaimed baggage to a Jew; Sir Faraday's butler would be a half-crown poorer at the year's end, and the hotelkeepers of Europe about the same date would be mourning a small but quite observable decline in profits. And that would be literally all. Perhaps the old gentleman thought something of the sort, for he looked melancholy enough as he pulled his bare, gray head back into the carriage, and the train smoked under the bridge and forth, with ever quickening speed, across the mingled heaths and woods of the New Forest.

Not many hundred yards beyond Browndean, however, a sudden jarring of brakes set everybody's teeth on edge, and there was a brutal stoppage. Morris Finsbury was aware of a confused uproar of voices, and sprang to the window. Women were screaming, men were tumbling from the windows on the track, the guard was crying to them to stay where they were; at the same time the train began to gather way and move very slowly backward toward Browndean; and the next moment, all these various sounds were blotted out in the apocalyptic whistle and the thundering onslaught of the down express.

The actual collision Morris did not hear. Perhaps he fainted. He had a wild dream of having seen the carriage double up and fall to pieces like a pantomime trick; and sure enough, when he came to himself, he was lying on the bare earth and under the open sky. His head ached savagely; he carried his hand to his brow and was not surprised to see it red with blood. The air was filled with an intolerable, throbbing roar, which he expected to find die away with the return of consciousness; and instead of that it seemed but to swell the louder and to pierce the more cruelly through his ears. It was a raging, bellowing thunder, like a boiler-riveting factory.

And now curiosity began to stir, and he sat up and looked about him. The track at this point ran in a sharp curve about a wooded hillock; all of the near side was heaped with the wreckage of the Bournemouth train; that of the express was mostly hidden by the trees; and just at the turn, under clouds of vomiting steam and piled about with cairns of living coal, lay what remained of the two engines, one upon the other. On the heathy margin of the line were many people running to and fro, and crying aloud as they ran, and many others lying motionless like sleeping tramps.

Morris suddenly drew an inference. "There has been an accident!" thought he, and was elated at his perspicacity. Almost at the same time his eye lighted on John, who lay close by as white as paper. "Poor old John! poor old cove!" he thought, the schoolboy expression popping forth from some forgotten treasury, and he took his brother's hand in his with childish tenderness. It was perhaps the touch that recalled him; at least John opened his eyes, sat suddenly up, and after several ineffectual movements of his lips, "What's the row?" said he, in a phantom voice.

The din of that devil's smithy still thundered in their ears. "Let us get away from that," Morris cried, and pointed to the vomit of steam that still spouted from the broken engines. And the pair helped each other up, and stood and quaked and wavered and stared about them at the scene of death.

Just then they were approached by a party of men who had already organized themselves for the purposes of rescue.

"Are you hurt?" cried one of these, a young fellow with the sweat streaming down his pallid face, and who by the way he was treated was evidently the doctor.

Morris shook his head, and the young man, nodding grimly, handed him a bottle of some spirit.

"Take a drink of that," he said, "your friend looks as if he needed it badly. We want every man we can get," he added; "there's terrible work before us, and nobody should shirk. If you can do no more you can carry a stretcher."

The doctor was hardly gone before Morris, under the spur of the dram, awoke to the full possession of his wits.

"My God!" he cried. "Uncle Joseph!"

"Yes," said John, "where can he be? He can't be far off. I hope the old party isn't damaged."

"Come and help me to look," said Morris, with a snap of savage determination strangely foreign to his ordinary bearing; and then, for one moment, he broke forth, "If he's dead!" he cried, and shook his fist at heaven.

To and fro the brothers hurried, staring in the faces of the wounded, or turning the dead upon their backs. They must have thus examined forty people, and still there was no word of Uncle Joseph. But now the course of their search brought them near the centre of the collision, where the boilers were still blowing off steam with a deafening clamour. It was a part of the field not yet gleaned by the rescuing party. The ground, especially on the margin of the wood, was full of inequalities — here a pit, there a hillock surmounted with a bush of furze. It was a place where many bodies might lie concealed, and they beat it like pointers after game. Suddenly Morris, who was leading, paused and reached forth his index with a tragic gesture. John followed the direction of his brother's hand.

In the bottom of a sandy hole lay something that had once been human. The face had suffered severely, and it was unrecognisable; but that was not required. The snowy hair, the coat of marten, the ventilating cloth, the hygienic flannel — everything down to the health boots from Messrs. Dall & Crumbie's, identified the body as that of Uncle Joseph. Only the forage cap must have been lost in the convulsion, for the dead man was bareheaded.

"The poor old beggar!" said John, with a touch of natural feeling; "I would give ten pounds we hadn't chivied him in the train!"

But there was no sentiment in the face of Morris as he gazed upon the dead. Gnawing his nails, with introverted eyes, his brow marked with the stamp of tragic indignation and tragic intellectual effort, he stood there silent. Here was a last injustice; he had been robbed while he was an orphan at school, he had been lashed to a decadent leather business, he had been saddled with Miss Hazeltine, his cousin had been defrauding him of the Tontine, and he had borne all this, we might almost say, with dignity, and now they had gone and killed his uncle!

"Here!" he said, suddenly, "take his heels, we must get him into the woods. I'm not going to have anybody find this."

"O, fudge!" said John, "where's the use?"

"Do what I tell you," spirted Morris, as he took the corpse by the shoulders. "Am I to carry him myself?"

They were close upon the borders of the wood; in ten or twelve paces they were under cover; and a little farther back, in a sandy clearing of the trees, they laid their burthen down, and stood and looked at it with loathing.

"What do you mean to do?" whispered John.

"Bury him, to be sure!" responded Morris, and he opened his pocket knife and began feverishly to dig.

"You'll never make a hand of it with that," objected the other.

"If you won't help me, you cowardly shirk," screamed Morris, "you can go to the devil!"

"It's the childishest folly," said John, "but no man shall call me a coward," and he began to help his brother grudgingly.

The soil was sandy and light, but matted with the roots of the surrounding firs. Gorse tore their hands; and as they baled the sand from the grave, it was often discoloured with their blood. An hour passed of unremitting energy upon the part of Morris, of lukewarm help on that of John; and still the trench was barely nine inches in depth. Into this the body was rudely flung; sand was piled upon it, and then more sand must be dug, and gorse had to be cut to pile on that; and still from one end of the sordid mound a pair of feet projected and caught the light upon their patent-leather toes. But by this time the nerves of both were shaken; even Morris had enough of his grisly task; and they skulked off like animals into the thickest of the neighbouring covert.

"It's the best that we can do," said Morris, sitting down.

"And now," said John, "perhaps you'll have the politeness to tell me what it's all about."

"Upon my word," cried Morris, "if you do not understand for yourself, I almost despair of telling you."

"Oh, of course it's some rot about the tontine," returned the other. "But it's the merest nonsense. We've lost it, and there's an end."

"I tell you," said Morris, "Uncle Masterman is dead. I know it, there's a voice here that tells me so."

"Well, and so is Uncle Joseph," said John.

"He's not dead unless I choose," returned Morris.

"And come to that," cried John, "if you're right, and Uncle Masterman's been dead ever so long, all we have to do is to tell the truth and expose Michael."

"You seem to think Michael is a fool," sneered Morris. "Can't you understand he's been preparing this fraud for years? He has the whole thing ready: the nurse, the doctor, the undertaker, all bought, the certificate all ready but the date! Let him get wind of this business and you mark my words, Uncle Masterman will die in two days and be buried in a week. But see here, Johnny; what Michael can do, I can do. If he plays a game of bluff, so can I. If his father is to live forever, by God, so shall my uncle!"

"It's illegal, ain't it?" said John.

"A man must have *some* moral courage," replied Morris with dignity.

"And then suppose you're wrong? suppose Uncle Masterman's alive and kicking?"

"Well, even then," responded the plotter, "we are no worse than we were before; in fact, we're better. Uncle Masterman must die some day; as long as Uncle Joseph was alive, he might have died any day; but we're out of all that trouble now: there's no sort of limit to the game that I propose—it can be kept up till Kingdom Come."

"If I could only see how you meant to set about it!" sighed John. "But you know, Morris, you always were such a bungler."

"I'd like to know what I ever bungled," cried Morris; "I have the best collection of signet rings in London."

"Well, you know, there's the leather business," suggested the other. "That's considered rather a hash."

It was a mark of singular self-control in Morris that he suffered this to pass unchallenged and even unresented.

"About the business in hand," said he, "once we can get him up to Bloomsbury, there's no sort of trouble. We bury him in the cellar, which seems made for it; and then all I have to do is to start out and find a venal doctor."

"Why can't we leave him where he is?" asked John.

"Because we know nothing about the country," retorted Morris. "This wood may be a regular lovers' walk. Turn your mind to the real difficulty. How are we to get him up to Bloomsbury?"

Various schemes were mooted and rejected. The railway station at Browndean was of course out of the question; for it would now be a centre of curiosity and gossip, and (of all things) they would be least able to despatch a dead body without remark. John feebly proposed getting an ale-cask and sending it as beer, but the objections to this course were so overwhelming that Morris scorned to answer. The purchase of a packing-case seemed equally hopeless; for why should two gentlemen without baggage of any kind require a packing-case? They would be more likely to require clean linen.

"We are working on wrong lines," cried Morris at last. "The thing must be gone about more carefully. Suppose, now," he added, excitedly, speaking by fits and starts as if he were thinking aloud, "suppose we rent a cottage by the month: a householder can buy a packing-case without remark. Then suppose we clear the people out to-day, get the packing-case to-night, and to-morrow I hire a carriage — or a cart that we could drive ourselves — and take the box, or whatever we get, to Ringwood or Lyndhurst or somewhere, we could label it 'specimens,' don't you see? — Johnny, I believe I've hit the nail at last."

"Well, it sounds more feasible," admitted John.

"Of course, we must take assumed names," continued Morris. "It would never do to keep our own. What do you say to 'Masterman' itself? It sounds quiet and dignified."

"I will *not* take the name of Masterman," returned his brother; "you may, if you like. I shall call myself Vance — the Great Vance; positively the last six nights. There's some go in a name like that."

"Vance!" cried Morris. "Do you think we are playing a pantomime for our amusement? There was never anybody named Vance who wasn't a music-hall singer."

"That's the beauty of it," returned John, "it gives you some standing at once. You may call yourself Fortescue till all's blue, and nobody cares; but to be Vance gives a man a natural nobility."

"But there's lots of other theatrical names," cried Morris. "Leybourne, Irving, Brough, Toole ——"

"Devil a one will I take," returned his brother, "I am going to have my little lark out of this as well as you."

"Very well," said Morris, who perceived that John was determined to carry his point, "I shall be Robert Vance."

"And I shall be George Vance," cried John, "the only original George Vance! Rally round the only original!"

Repairing as well as they were able the disorder of their clothes, Finsbury brothers returned to Browndean by a circuitous route in quest of luncheon and a suitable cottage. It is not always easy to drop at a moment's notice on a furnished residence in a retired locality; but fortune presently introduced our adventurers to a deaf carpenter, a man rich in cottages of the required description, and unaffectedly eager to supply their wants.

The second place they visited, standing, as it did, about a mile and a half from any neighbours, caused them to exchange a glance of hope. On a nearer view the place was not without depressing features. It stood in a marshy-looking hollow of a heath; tall trees obscured its windows; the thatch visibly rotted on the rafters; and the walls were stained with splashes of unwholesome green. The rooms were small, the ceilings low, the furniture merely nominal; a strange chill and a haunting smell of damp pervaded the kitchen; and the bedroom boasted only of one bed.

Morris, with a view to cheapening the place, remarked on this defect.

"Well," returned the man, "if you can't sleep two abed, you'd better take a villa residence."

"And then," pursued Morris, "there's no water; how do you get your water?"

"We fill *that* from the spring," replied the carpenter, pointing to a big barrel that stood beside the door. "The spring ain't so *very* far off, after all, and it's easy brought in buckets. There's a bucket there."

Morris nudged his brother as they examined the water-butt; it was new, and very solidly constructed for its office; if anything had been wanting to decide them, this eminently practicable barrel would have turned the scale. A bargain was promptly struck, the month's rent was paid upon the nail, and about an hour later Finsbury brothers might have been observed returning to the blighted cottage, having along with them the key, which was the symbol of their tenancy, a spirit-lamp, with which they fondly told themselves they would be able to cook, a pork-pie of suitable dimensions, and a quart of the worst whiskey in Hampshire. Nor was this all they had effected; already (under the plea that they were landscape-painters) they had hired for dawn on the morrow a light but solid two-wheeled cart; so that, when they entered in their new character, they were able to tell themselves that the back of the business was already broken.

John proceeded to get tea; while Morris, foraging about the house, was presently delighted by discovering the lid of the water-butt upon the kitchen shelf. Here, then, was the packing-case complete; in the absence of straw, the blankets (which he himself, at least, had not the smallest intention of using for their present purpose) would exactly take the place of packing; and Morris, as the difficulties began to vanish from his path, rose almost to the brink of exultation. There was, however, one difficulty not yet faced, one upon which his whole scheme depended. Would John consent to remain alone in the cottage? He had not yet dared to put the question.

It was with high good humour that the pair sat down to the deal table, and proceeded to fall to on the pork-pie. Morris retailed the discovery of the lid, and the Great Vance was pleased to applaud by beating on the table with his fork in true music-hall style.

"That's the dodge," he cried. "I always said a water-butt was what you wanted for this business."

"Of course," said Morris, thinking this a favourable opportunity to prepare his brother, "of course you must stay on in this place till I give the word; I'll give out that uncle is resting in the New Forest. It would not do for both of us to appear in London; we could never conceal the absence of the old man."

John's jaw dropped.

"Oh, come!" he cried. "You can stay in this hole yourself. I won't."

The colour came into Morris's cheeks. He saw that he must win his brother at any cost.

"You must please remember, Johnny," he said, "the amount of the tontine. If I succeed, we shall have each fifty thousand to place to our bank account; ay, and nearer sixty."

"But if you fail," returned John, "what then? What'll be the colour of our bank account in that case?"

"I will pay all expenses," said Morris, with an inward struggle; "you shall lose nothing."

"Well," said John, with a laugh, "if the ex-s are yours, and half profits mine, I don't mind remaining here for a couple of days."

"A couple of days!" cried Morris, who was beginning to get angry and controlled himself with difficulty. "Why, you would do more to win five pounds on a horse race!"

"Perhaps I would," returned the Great Vance; "it's the artistic temperament."

"This is monstrous!" burst out Morris. "I take all risks; I pay all expenses; I divide profits; and you won't take the slightest pains to help me. It's not decent; it's not honest; it's not even kind."

"But suppose," objected John, who was considerably impressed by his brother's vehemence, "suppose that Uncle Masterman is alive after all, and lives ten years longer; must I rot here all that time?"

"Of course not," responded Morris, in a more conciliatory tone. "I only ask a month at the outside; and if Uncle Masterman is not dead by that time you can go abroad."

"Go abroad?" repeated John, eagerly. "Why shouldn't I go at once? Tell 'em that Joseph and I are seeing life in Paris."

"Nonsense," said Morris.

"Well, but look here," said John; "it's this house, it's such a pig-sty, it's so dreary and damp. You said yourself that it was damp."

"Only to the carpenter," Morris distinguished, "and that was to reduce the rent. But really you know, now we're in it, I've seen worse."

"And what am I to do?" complained the victim. "How can I entertain a friend?"

"My dear Johnny, if you don't think the tontine worth a little trouble, say so; and I'll give the business up."

"You're dead certain of the figures, I suppose?" asked John. "Well"—with a deep sigh—"send me the *Pink Un* and all the comic papers regularly. I'll face the music."

As afternoon drew on, the cottage breathed more thrillingly of its native marsh; a creeping chill inhabited its chambers; the fire smoked; and a shower of rain, coming up from the Channel on a slant of wind, tingled on the window-panes. At intervals, when the gloom deepened towards despair, Morris would produce the whiskey bottle, and at first John welcomed the diversion—not for long. It has been said this spirit was the worst in Hampshire; only those acquainted with the county can appreciate the force of that superlative;

and at length even the Great Vance (who was no connoisseur) waved the decoction from his lips. The approach of dusk, feebly combated with a single tallow candle, added a touch of tragedy; and John suddenly stopped whistling through his fingers — an art to the practice of which he had been reduced — and bitterly lamented his concessions.

"I can't stay here a month," he cried. "No one could. The thing's nonsense, Morris. The parties that lived in the Bastille would rise against a place like this."

With an admirable affectation of indifference, Morris proposed a game of pitch-and-toss. To what will not the diplomatist condescend! It was John's favourite game; indeed, his only game — he had found all the rest too intellectual — and he played it with equal skill and good fortune. To Morris himself, on the other hand, the whole business was detestable; he was a bad pitcher, he had no luck in tossing, and he was one who suffered torments when he lost. But John was in a dangerous humour, and his brother was prepared for any sacrifice.

By seven o'clock, Morris, with incredible agony, had lost a couple of half-crowns. Even with the tontine before his eyes, this was as much as he could bear; and remarking that he would take his revenge some other time, he proposed a bit of supper and a grog.

Before they had made an end of this refreshment, it was time to be at work. A bucket of water for present necessities was withdrawn from the water-butt, which was then emptied and rolled before the kitchen fire to dry; and the two brothers set forth on their adventure under a starless heaven.

CHAPTER III

THE LECTURER AT LARGE

WHETHER mankind is really partial to happiness is an open question. Not a month passes by, but some cherished son runs off into the merchant service, or some valued husband decamps to Texas with a lady help; clergymen have fled from their parishioners; and even judges have been known to retire. To an open mind, it will appear (upon the whole) less strange that Joseph Finsbury should have been led to entertain ideas of escape. His lot (I think we may say) was not a happy one. My friend, Mr. Morris, with whom I travel up twice or thrice a week from Snaresbrook Park, is certainly a gentleman whom I esteem; but he was scarce a model nephew. As for John, he is of course an excellent fellow; but if he was the only link that bound one to a home, I think the most of us would vote for foreign travel. In the case of Joseph, John (if he were a link at all) was not the only one; endearing bonds had long enchained the old gentleman to Bloomsbury; and by these expressions I do not in the least refer to Julia Hazeltine (of whom, however, he was fond enough), but to that collection of manuscript notebooks in which his life lay buried. That he should ever have made up his mind to separate himself from these collections, and go forth upon the world with no other resources than his memory supplied, is a circumstance highly pathetic in itself, and but little creditable to the wisdom of his nephews.

The design, or at least the temptation, was already some months old; and when a bill for eight hundred pounds, payable to himself, was suddenly placed in Joseph's hand, it brought matters to an issue. He retained that bill, which, to one of his frugality, meant wealth; and he promised himself to disappear among the crowds at Waterloo, or (if that should prove impossible) to slink out of the house in the course of the evening and melt like a dream into the millions of London. By a peculiar interposition of providence and railway mismanagement, he had not so long to wait.

He was one of the first to come to himself and scramble to his feet, after the Browndean catastrophe, and he had no sooner remarked his prostrate nephews, than he understood his opportunity and fled. A man of upward of seventy, who has just met with a railway accident, and who is cumbered besides with the full uniform of Sir Faraday Bond, is not very likely to flee far, but the wood was close at hand and offered the fugitive at least a temporary covert. Hither, then, the old gentleman skipped with extraordinary expedition, and being somewhat winded and a good deal shaken, here he lay down in a convenient grove and was presently overwhelmed by slumber. The way of fate is often highly entertaining to the looker-on, and it is certainly a pleasant circumstance, that while Morris and John were delving in the sand to conceal the body of a total stranger, their uncle lay in dreamless sleep a few hundred yards deeper in the wood.

He was awakened by the jolly note of a bugle from the neighbouring highroad, where a char-à-banc was bowling by with some belated tourists. The sound cheered his old heart, it directed his steps into the bargain, and soon he was on the highway, looking east and west from under his vizor, and doubtfully revolving what he ought to do. A deliberate sound of wheels arose in the distance, and then a cart was seen approaching, well filled with parcels, driven by a good-natured looking man on a double bench, and displaying on a board the legend, "I. Chandler, carrier." In the infamously prosaic mind of Mr. Finsbury, certain streaks of poetry survived and were still efficient; they had carried him to Asia Minor as a giddy youth of forty, and now, in the first hours of his recovered freedom, they suggested to him the idea of continuing his flight in Mr. Chandler's cart. It would be cheap; properly broached, it might even cost nothing, and after years of mittens and hygienic flannel, his heart leaped out to meet the notion of exposure.

Mr. Chandler was perhaps a little puzzled to find so old a gentleman, so strangely clothed, and begging for a lift on so retired a roadside. But he was a good-natured man, glad to do a service, and so he took the stranger up; and he had his own idea of civility, and so he asked no questions. Silence, in fact, was quite good enough for Mr. Chandler; but the cart had scarcely begun to move forward ere he found himself involved in a one-sided conversation.

"I can see," began Mr. Finsbury, "by the mixture of parcels and boxes that are contained in your cart, each marked with its individual label, and by the good Flemish mare you drive, that you occupy the post of carrier in that great English system of transport, which, with all its defects, is the pride of our country."

"Yes, sir," returned Mr. Chandler vaguely, for he hardly knew what to reply, "them parcels' posts has done us carriers a world of harm."

"I am not a prejudiced man," continued Joseph Finsbury. "As a young man I travelled much. Nothing was too small or too obscure for me to acquire. At sea I studied seamanship, learned the complicated knots employed by mariners, and acquired the technical terms. At Naples, I would learn the art of making macaroni; at Nice, the principles of making candied fruit. I never went to the opera without first buying the book of the piece, and making myself acquainted with the principal airs by picking them out on the piano with one finger."

"You must have seen a deal, sir," remarked the carrier, touching up his horse; "I wish I could have had your advantages."

"Do you know how often the word whip occurs in the Old Testament?" continued the old gentleman. "One hundred and (if I remember exactly) forty-seven times."

"Do it indeed, sir?" said Mr. Chandler. "I never should have thought it."

"The Bible contains three million five hundred and one thousand two hundred and forty-nine letters. Of verses I believe there are upward of eighteen thousand. There have been many editions of the Bible; Wiclif was the first to introduce it into England, about the year 1300. The 'Paragraph Bible,' as it is called, is a well-known edition, and is so called because it is divided into paragraphs. The 'Breeches Bible' is another well-known instance, and gets its name either because it was printed by one Breeches, or because the place of publication bore that name."

The carrier remarked drily that he thought that was only natural, and turned his attention to the more congenial task of passing a cart of hay; it was a matter of some difficulty, for the road was narrow, and there was a ditch on either hand.

"I perceive," began Mr. Finsbury, when they had successfully passed the cart, "that you hold your reins with one hand; you should employ two."

"Well, I like that!" cried the carrier, contemptuously. "Why?"

"You do not understand," continued Mr. Finsbury. "What I tell you is a scientific fact, and reposes on the theory of the lever, a branch of mechanics. There are some very interesting little shilling-books upon the field of study, which I should think a man in your station would take a pleasure to read. But I am afraid you have not cultivated the art of observation; at least we have now driven together for some time, and I cannot remember that you have contributed a single fact. This is a very false principle, my good man. For instance, I do not know if you observed that (as you passed the hay-cart man) you took your left?"

"Of course I did," cried the carrier, who was now getting belligerent; "he'd have the law on me if I hadn't."

"In France, now," resumed the old man, "and also, I believe, in the United States of America, you would have taken the right."

"I would not," cried Mr. Chandler, indignantly. "I would have taken the left."

"I observe," again continued Mr. Finsbury, scorning to reply, "that you mend the dilapidated parts of your harness with string. I have always protested against this carelessness and slovenliness of the English poor. In an essay that I once read before an appreciative audience——"

"It ain't string," said the carrier, sullenly, "it's packthread."

"I have always protested," resumed the old man, "that in their private and domestic life, as well as in their labouring career, the lower classes of this country are improvident, thriftless, and extravagant. A stitch in time——"

"Who the devil *are* the lower classes?" cried the carrier. "You are the lower classes yourself! If I thought you were a blooming aristocrat I shouldn't have given you a lift."

The words were uttered with undisguised ill-feeling; it was plain the pair were not congenial, and further conversation, even to one of Mr. Finsbury's pathetic loquacity, was out of the question. With an angry gesture he pulled down the brim of the forage-cap over his eyes, and producing a note-book and a blue pencil from one of his innermost pockets, soon became absorbed in calculations.

On his part the carrier fell to whistling with fresh zest; and if (now and again) he glanced at the companion of his drive, it was with mingled feelings of triumph and alarm — triumph because he had succeeded in arresting that prodigy of speech, and alarm lest (by any accident) it should begin again. Even the shower, which presently overtook and passed them, was endured by both in silence; and it was still in silence that they drove at length into Southampton.

Dusk had fallen; the shop windows glimmered forth into the streets of the old seaport; in private houses lights were kindled for the evening meal; and Mr. Finsbury began to think complacently of his night's lodging. He put his papers by, cleared his throat, and looked doubtfully at Mr. Chandler.

"Will you be civil enough," said he, "to recommend me to an inn?"

Mr. Chandler pondered for a moment.

"Well," he said at last, "I wonder how about the 'Tregonwell Arms.'"

"The 'Tregonwell Arms' will do very well," returned the old man, "if it's clean and cheap, and the people civil."

"I wasn't thinking so much of you," returned Mr. Chandler, thoughtfully. "I was thinking of my friend Watts as keeps the 'ouse; he's a friend of mine, you see, and he helped me through my trouble last year. And I was thinking, would it be fair-like on Watts to saddle him with an old party like you, who might be the death of him with general information. Would it be fair to the 'ouse?" inquired Mr. Chandler, with an air of candid appeal.

"Mark me," cried the old gentleman, with spirit. "It was kind in you to bring me here for nothing, but it gives you no right to address me in such terms. Here's a shilling for your trouble; and if you do not choose to set me down at the 'Tregonwell Arms,' I can find it for myself."

Chandler was surprised and a little startled; muttering something apologetic, he returned the shilling, drove in silence through several intricate lanes and small streets, drew up at length before the bright windows of an inn, and called loudly for "Mr. Watts."

"Is that you, Jem?" cried a hearty voice from the stableyard. "Come in and warm yourself."

"I only stopped here," Mr. Chandler explained, "to let down an old gent what wants food and lodging. Mind, I warn you agin him; he's worse nor a temperance lecturer."

Mr. Finsbury dismounted with difficulty, for he was cramped with his long drive, and the shaking he had received in the accident. The friendly Mr. Watts, in spite of the carter's scarcely agreeable introduction, treated the old gentleman with the utmost courtesy, and led him into the back parlour, where there was a big fire burning in the grate. Presently a table was spread in the same room, and he was invited to seat himself before a stewed fowl — somewhat the worse for having seen service before — and a big pewter mug of ale from the tap.

He rose from supper a giant refreshed; and changing his seat to one nearer the fire, began to examine the other guests with an eye to the delights of oratory. There were near a dozen present, all men, and (as Joseph exulted to perceive) all working-men. Often already had he seen cause to bless that appetite for disconnected fact and rotatory argument, which is so marked a character of the mechanic. But even an audience of working-men has to be courted, and there was no man more deeply versed in the necessary arts than Joseph Finsbury. He placed his glasses on his nose, drew from his pocket a bundle of papers, and spread them before him on a table. He crumpled them, he smoothed them out; now he skimmed them over, apparently well pleased with their contents; now, with tapping pencil and contracted brows, he seemed maturely to consider some particular statement. A stealthy glance about the room assured him of the success of his manœuvres; all eyes were turned on the performer, mouths were open, pipes hung suspended; the birds were charmed. At the same moment the entrance of Mr. Watts afforded him an opportunity.

"I observe," said he, addressing the landlord, but taking at the same time the whole room into his confidence with an encouraging look, "I observe that some of these gentlemen are looking with curiosity in my direction; and certainly it is unusual to see anyone immersed in literary and scientific labours in the public apartment of an inn. I have here some calculations I made this morning upon the cost of living in this and other countries — a subject, I need scarcely say, highly interesting to the working classes. I have calculated a scale of living for incomes of eighty, one hundred and sixty, two hundred, and two hundred and forty pounds a year. I must confess that the income of eighty pounds has somewhat baffled me, and the others are not so exact as I could wish; for the price of washing varies largely in foreign countries, and the different cokes, coals, and firewoods fluctuate surprisingly. I will read my researches, and I hope you won't scruple to point out to me any little errors that I may have committed either from oversight or ignorance. I will begin, gentlemen, with the income of eighty pounds a year."

Whereupon the old gentleman, with less compassion than he would have had for brute beasts, delivered himself of all his tedious calculations. As he occasionally gave ten versions of a single income, placing the imaginary person in London, Paris, Bagdad, Spitzbergen, Bassorah, Heligoland, the Scilly Islands, Brighton, Cincinnati, and Nijni-Novgorod, with an appropriate outfit for each locality, it is no wonder that his hearers look back on that evening as the most tiresome they ever spent.

Long before Mr. Finsbury had reached Nijni-Novgorod with the income of one hundred and sixty pounds, the company had dwindled and faded away to a few old topers and the bored but affable Watts. There was a constant stream of customers from the outer world, but so soon as they were served they drank their liquor quickly, and departed with the utmost celerity for the next public-house.

By the time the young man with two hundred a year was vegetating in the Scilly Islands, Mr. Watts was left alone with the economist; and that imaginary person had scarce commenced life at Brighton before the last of his pursuers desisted from the chase.

Mr. Finsbury slept soundly after the manifold fatigues of the day. He rose late, and after a good breakfast, ordered the bill. Then it was that he made a discovery which has been made by many others, both before and since: that it is one thing to order your bill, and another to discharge it. The items were moderate and (what does not always follow) the total small; but after the most sedulous review of all his pockets, one and ninepence halfpenny appeared to be the total of the old gentleman's available assets. He asked to see Mr. Watts.

"Here is a bill on London for eight hundred pounds," said Mr. Finsbury, as that worthy appeared. "I am afraid unless you choose to discount it yourself, it may detain me a day or two till I can get it cashed."

Mr. Watts looked at the bill, turned it over, and dogs-eared it with his fingers. "It will keep you a day or two?" he said, repeating the old man's words. "You have no other money with you?"

"Some trifling change," responded Joseph. "Nothing to speak of."

"Then you can send it me; I should be pleased to trust you."

"To tell the truth," answered the old gentleman, "I am more than half inclined to stay; I am in need of funds."

"If a loan of ten shillings would help you, it is at your service," responded Watts, with eagerness.

"No, I think I would rather stay," said the old man, "and get my bill discounted."

"You shall not stay in my house," cried Mr. Watts. "This is the last time you shall have a bed at the 'Tregonwell Arms.'"

"I insist upon remaining," replied Mr. Finsbury, with spirit; "I remain by Act of Parliament; turn me out if you dare."

"Then pay your bill," said Mr. Watts.

"Take that," cried the old man, tossing him the negotiable bill.

"It is not legal tender," replied Mr. Watts. "You must leave my house at once."

"You cannot appreciate the contempt I feel for you, Mr. Watts," said the old gentleman, resigning himself to circumstances. "But you shall feel it in one way; I refuse to pay my bill."

"I don't care for your bill," responded Mr. Watts. "What I want is your absence."

"That you shall have!" said the old gentleman, and taking up his forage-cap as he spoke, he crammed it on his head. "Perhaps you are too insolent," he added, "to inform me of the time of the next London train?"

"It leaves in three-quarters of an hour," returned the inn-keeper, with alacrity. "You can easily catch it."

Joseph's position was one of considerable weakness. On the one hand, it would have been well to avoid the direct line of railway, since it was there he might expect his nephews to lie in wait for his recapture; on the other, it was highly desirable, it was even strictly needful, to get the bill discounted ere it should be stopped. To London, therefore, he decided to proceed on the first train; and there remained but one point to be considered, how to pay his fare.

Joseph's nails were never clean, he ate almost entirely with his knife. I doubt if you could say he had the manners of a gentleman; but he had better than that, a touch of genuine dignity. Was it from his stay in Asia Minor? Was it from a strain in the Finsbury blood sometimes alluded to by customers? At least, when he presented himself before the station-master, his salaam was truly oriental, palm-trees appeared to crowd about the little office, and the simoom or the bulbul — but I leave this image to persons better acquainted with the East. His appearance, besides, was highly in his favour; the uniform of Sir Faraday, however inconvenient and conspicuous, was, at least, a costume in which no swindler could have hoped to prosper; and the exhibition of a valuable watch and a bill for eight hundred pounds completed what deportment had begun. Quarter of an hour later, when the train came up, Mr. Finsbury was introduced to the guard and installed in a first-class compartment, the station-master smilingly assuming all responsibility.

As the old gentleman sat waiting the moment of departure, he was the witness of an incident strangely connected with the fortunes of his house. A packing-case of cyclopean bulk was borne along the platform by some dozen of tottering porters, and ultimately, to the delight of a considerable crowd, hoisted on board the van. It is often the cheering task of the historian to direct attention to the designs and (if it may be reverently said) the artifices of Providence. In the luggage van, as Joseph was borne out of the station of Southampton East upon his way to London, the egg of this romance lay (so to speak) unhatched. The huge packing-case was directed "to lie at Waterloo till called for," and addressed to one "William Dent Pitman;" and the very next article, a goodly barrel jammed into the corner of the van, bore the superscription "M. Finsbury, 16 John Street, Bloomsbury. Carriage paid."

In this juxtaposition, the train of powder was prepared; and there was now wanting only an idle hand to fire it off.

CHAPTER IV

THE MAGISTRATE IN THE LUGGAGE VAN

THE city of Winchester is famed for a cathedral, a bishop — but he was unfortunately killed some years ago while riding — a public school, a considerable assortment of the military, and the deliberate passage of the trains on the London and South Western line. These and many similar associations would have doubtless crowded on the mind of Joseph Finsbury; but his spirit had at that time flitted from the railway compartment to a heaven of populous lecture-halls and endless oratory. His body, in the meanwhile, lay doubled on the cushions, the forage-cap rakishly tilted back after the fashion of those that lie in wait for nursery-maids, the poor old face quiescent, one arm clutching to his heart *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*.

To him, thus unconscious, enter and exeunt again a pair of voyagers. These two had saved the train and no more. A tandem urged to its last speed, an act of something closely bordering on brigandage at the ticket office, and a spasm of running, had brought them on the platform just as the engine uttered its departing snort. There was but one carriage easily within their reach; and they had sprung into it, and the leader and elder already had his feet upon the floor, when he observed Mr. Finsbury.

"Good God!" he cried, "Uncle Joseph! This'll never do."

And he backed out, almost upsetting his companion, and once more closed the door upon the sleeping patriarch.

The next moment the pair had jumped into the baggage van.

"What's the row about your Uncle Joseph?" inquired the younger traveller, mopping his brow. "Does he object to smoking?"

"I don't know that there's anything the row with him," returned the other. "He's by no means the first comer, my Uncle Joseph, I can tell you! Very respectable old gentleman; interested in leather; been to Asia Minor; no family, no assets—and a tongue, my dear Wickham, sharper than a serpent's tooth."

"Cantankerous old party, eh?" suggested Wickham.

"Not in the least," cried the other; "only a man with a solid talent for being a bore; rather cheery, I dare say, on a desert island, but on a railway journey, insupportable. You should hear him on Tonti, the ass that started tontines. He's incredible on Tonti."

"By Jove!" cried Wickham, "then you're one of these Finsbury tontine fellows. I hadn't a guess of that."

"Ah!" said the other, "do you know, that old boy in the carriage is worth a hundred thousand pounds to me? There he was asleep, and nobody there but you! But I spared him, because I'm a conservative in politics."

Mr. Wickham, pleased to be in a luggage van, was flitting to and fro like a gentlemanly butterfly.

"By Jingo!" he cried, "here's something for you!

'M. Finsbury, 16 John Street, Bloomsbury, London.' M. stands for Michael, you sly dog; you keep two establishments, do you?"

"Oh, that's Morris," responded Michael from the other end of the van, where he had found a comfortable seat upon some sacks. "He's a little cousin of mine. I like him myself, because he's afraid of me. He's one of the ornaments of Bloomsbury, and has a collection of some kind — birds' eggs or something — that's supposed to be curious. I bet it's nothing to my clients!"

"What a lark it would be to play billy with the labels!" chuckled Mr. Wickham. "By George, here's a tack-hammer! We might send all these things skipping about the premises like what's-his-name!"

At this moment the guard, surprised by the sound of voices, opened the door of his little cabin.

"You had best step in here, gentlemen," said he, when he had heard their story.

"Won't you come, Wickham?" asked Michael.

"Catch me — I want to travel in a van," replied the south.

And so the door of communication was closed; and for the rest of the run Mr. Wickham was left alone over his diversions on the one side, and on the other Michael and the guard were closeted together in familiar talk.

"I can get you a compartment here, sir," observed the official, as the train began to slacken speed before Bishopstoke station. "You had best get out at my door, and I can bring your friend."

Mr. Wickham, whom we left (as the reader has shrewdly suspected) beginning to "play billy" with the labels in the van, was a young gentleman of much wealth, a pleasing but sandy exterior, and a highly vacant mind. Not many months before, he had contrived to get himself black-mailed by the family of a Wallachian Hospodar, resident for political reasons in the gay city of Paris. A common friend (to whom he had confided his distress) recommended him to Michael; and the lawyer was no sooner in possession of the facts, than he instantly assumed the offensive, fell on the flank of the Wallachian forces, and in the inside of three days, had the satisfaction to behold them routed and fleeing for the Danube. It is no business of ours to follow them on this retreat, over which the police were so obliging as to preside paternally. Thus relieved from what he loved to refer to as the Bulgarian Atrocity, Mr. Wickham returned to London with the most unbounded and embarrassing gratitude and admiration for his saviour. These sentiments were not repaid either in kind or degree; indeed, Michael was a trifle ashamed of his new client's friendship; it had taken many invitations to get him to Winchester and Wickham Manor; but he had gone at last, and was now returning. It has been remarked by some judicious thinker (possibly J. F. Smith) that Providence despises to employ no instrument, however humble; and it is now plain to the dullest that both Mr. Wickham and the Wallachian Hospodar were liquid lead and wedges in the hand of destiny.

Smitten with the desire to shine in Michael's eyes and show himself a person of original humour and resources, the young gentleman (who was a magistrate, more by token, in his native county) was no sooner alone in the van, than he fell upon the labels with all the zeal of a reformer; and when he rejoined the lawyer at Bishopstoke, his face was flushed with his exertions, and his cigar, which he had suffered to go out, was almost bitten in two.

"By George, but this has been a lark!" he cried. "I've sent the wrong thing to everybody in England. These cousins of yours have a packing-case as big as a house. I've muddled the whole business up to that extent, Finsbury, that if it were to get out, it's my belief we should be lynched."

It was useless to be serious with Mr. Wickham. "Take care," said Michael. "I am getting tired of your perpetual scrapes; my reputation is beginning to suffer."

"Your reputation will be all gone before you finish with me," replied his companion, with a grin. "Clap it in the bill, my boy. 'For total loss of reputation, six and eightpence.' But," continued Mr. Wickham, with more seriousness, "could I be bowled out of the Commission for this little jest? I know it's small, but I like to be a J. P. Speaking as a professional man, do you think there's any risk?"

"What does it matter?" responded Michael. "They'll chuck you out sooner or later. Somehow you don't give the effect of being a good magistrate."

"I only wish I was a solicitor," retorted his companion, "instead of a poor devil of a country gentleman. Suppose we start one of those tontine affairs ourselves; I to pay five hundred a year, and you to guarantee me against every misfortune except illness or marriage."

"It strikes me," remarked the lawyer with a meditative laugh, as he lighted a cigar; "it strikes me that you must be a cursed nuisance in this world of ours."

"Do you really think so, Finsbury?" responded the magistrate, leaning back in his cushions, delighted with the compliment. "Yes, I suppose I am a nuisance. But mind you, I have a stake in the country: don't forget that, dear boy."

CHAPTER V

MR. GIDEON FORSYTH AND THE GIGANTIC BOX

It has been mentioned that at Bournemouth Julia sometimes made acquaintances; it is true she had but a glimpse of them before the doors of John Street closed again upon its captives, but the glimpse was sometimes exhilarating, and the consequent regret was tempered with hope. Among those whom she had thus met a year before, was a young barrister of the name of Gideon Forsyth.

About three o'clock of the eventful day when the magistrate tampered with the labels, a somewhat moody and distempered ramble had carried Mr. Forsyth to the corner of John Street; and about the same moment Miss Hazeltine was called to the door of No. 16 by a thundering double knock.

Mr. Gideon Forsyth was a happy enough young man; he would have been happier if he had had more money and less uncle. One hundred and twenty pounds a year was all his store; but his uncle, Mr. Edward Hugh Bloomfield, supplemented this with a handsome allowance and a great deal of advice, couched in language that would probably have been judged intemperate on board a pirate ship. Mr. Bloomfield was indeed a figure quite peculiar to the days of Mr. Gladstone; what we may call (for the lack of an accepted expression) a Squirradical. Having acquired years without experience, he carried into the radical side of politics those noisy, after dinner-table passions, which we are more accustomed to connect with toryism in its severe and senile aspects. To the opinions of Mr. Bradlaugh, in fact, he added the temper and the sympathies of that extinct animal, the Squire. He admired pugilism, he carried a formidable oaken staff, he was a reverent churchman, and it was hard to know which would have more volcanically stirred his choler — a person who should have defended the established church, or one who should have neglected to attend its celebrations. He had besides some leveling catch-words, justly dreaded in the family circle; and when he could not go so far as to declare a step Un-English, he might still (and with hardly less effect) denounce it as Unpractical. It was under the ban of this lesser excommunication that Gideon had fallen. His views on the study of law had been pronounced unpractical; and it had been intimated to him, in a vociferous interview punctuated with the oaken staff, that he must either take a new start and get a brief or two, or prepare to live on his own money.

No wonder if Gideon was moody. He had not the slightest wish to modify his present habits; but he would not stand on that, since the recall of Mr. Bloomfield's allowance would revolutionise them still more radically. He had not the least desire to acquaint himself with law; he had looked into it already, and it seemed not to repay attention; but upon this also he was ready to give way. In fact, he would go as far as he could to meet the views of his uncle, the squirradical.

But there was one part of the programme that appeared independent of his will. How to get a brief? there was the question. And there was another and a worse. Suppose he got one, should he prove the better man?

Suddenly he found his way barred by a crowd. A garishly illuminated van was backed against the kerb; from its open stern, half resting on the street, half supported by some glistening athletes, the end of the largest packing-case in the county of Middlesex might have been seen protruding; while on the steps of the house, the burly person of the driver and the slim figure of a young girl stood as upon a stage, disputing.

"It is not for us," the girl was saying. "I beg you to take it away; it couldn't get into the house, even if you managed to get it out of the van."

"I shall leave it on the pavement, then, and M. Finsbury can arrange with the Vestry as he likes," said the van-man.

"But I am not M. Finsbury," expostulated the girl.

"It doesn't matter who you are," said the van-man.

"You must allow me to help you, Miss Hazeltine," said Gideon, putting out his hand.

Julia gave a little cry of pleasure. "Oh, Mr. Forsyth," she cried, "I am so glad to see you; we must get this horrid thing, which can only have come here by mistake, into the house. The man says we'll have to take off the door, or knock two of our windows into one, or be fined by the Vestry or Custom House or something, for leaving our parcels on the pavement."

The men, by this time, had successfully removed the box from the van, had plumped it down on the pavement, and now stood leaning against it, or gazing at the door of No. 16, in visible physical distress and mental embarrassment. The windows of the whole street had filled, as if by magic, with interested and entertained spectators.

With as thoughtful and scientific an expression as he could assume, Gideon measured the doorway with his cane, while Julia entered his observations in a drawing-book. He then measured the box, and, upon comparing his data, found that there was just enough space for it to enter. Next, throwing off his coat and waistcoat, he assisted the men to take the door from its hinges. And lastly, all by-standers being pressed into the service, the packing-case mounted the steps upon some fifteen pairs of wavering legs — scraped, loudly grinding, through the doorway — and was deposited at length, with a formidable convulsion, in the far end of the lobby, which it almost blocked. The artisans of this victory smiled upon each other as the dust subsided. It was true they had smashed a bust of Apollo and ploughed the wall into deep ruts; but, at least, they were no longer one of the public spectacles of London.

"Well, sir," said the van-man, "I never see such a job."

Gideon eloquently expressed his concurrence in this sentiment by pressing a couple of sovereigns in the man's hand.

"Make it three, sir, and I'll stand Sam to everybody here!" cried the latter; and this having been done, the whole body of volunteer porters swarmed into the van, which drove off in the direction of the nearest reliable public-house. Gideon closed the door on their departure and turned to Julia: their eyes met; the most uncontrollable mirth seized upon them both, and they made the house ring with their laughter. Then curiosity awoke in Julia's mind, and she went and examined the box, and more especially the label.

"This is the strangest thing that ever happened," she said, with another burst of laughter. "It is certainly Morris's handwriting, and I had a letter from him only this morning telling me to expect a barrel. Is there a barrel coming, too, do you think, Mr. Forsyth?"

"Statuary with Care, Fragile," read Gideon aloud from the painted warning on the box. "Then you were told nothing about this?"

"No," responded Julia. "Oh, Mr. Forsyth, don't you think we might take a peep at it?"

"Yes, indeed," cried Gideon. "Just let me have a hammer."

"Come down, and I'll show you where it is," cried Julia, "the shelf is too high for me to reach;" and, opening the door of the kitchen stair, she bade Gideon follow her. They found both a hammer and a chisel; but Gideon was surprised to see no sign of a servant. He also discovered that Miss Hazeltine had a very pretty little foot and ankle; and the discovery embarrassed him so much that he was glad to fall at once upon the packing-case.

He worked hard and earnestly, and dealt his blows with the precision of a blacksmith; Julia the while standing silently by his side and regarding rather the workman than the work. He was a handsome fellow, she told herself; she had never seen such beautiful arms. And suddenly, as though he had overheard these thoughts, Gideon turned and smiled to her. She, too, smiled and coloured; and the double change became her so prettily that Gideon forgot to turn away his eyes, and, swinging the hammer with a will, discharged a smashing blow on his own knuckles. With admirable presence of mind he crushed down an oath and substituted the harmless comment, "butter fingers!" But the pain was sharp, his nerve was shaken, and after an abortive trial he found he must desist from further operations.

In a moment Julia was off to the pantry, in a moment she was back again with a basin of water and a sponge, and had begun to bathe his wounded hand.

"I am dreadfully sorry," said Gideon, apologetically. "If I had had any manners I should have opened the box first, and smashed my hand afterward. It feels much better," he added. "I assure you it does."

"And now I think you are well enough to direct operations," said she. "Tell me what to do, and I'll be your workman."

"A very pretty workman," said Gideon, rather forgetting himself. She turned and looked at him, with a suspicion of a frown; and the indiscreet young man was glad to direct her attention to the packing-case. The bulk of the work had been accomplished; and presently Julia had burst through the last barrier and disclosed a zone of straw. In a moment they were kneeling side by side, engaged like haymakers; the next they were rewarded with a glimpse of something white and polished; and the next again, laid bare an unmistakable marble leg.

"He is surely a very athletic person," said Julia.

"I never saw anything like it," responded Gideon. "His muscles stand out like penny rolls."

Another leg was soon disclosed, and then what seemed to be a third. This resolved itself, however, into a knotted club resting upon a pedestal.

"It is a Hercules," cried Gideon; "I might have guessed that from his calf. I'm supposed to be rather partial to statuary, but when it comes to Hercules, the police should interfere. I should say," he added, glancing with disaffection at the swollen leg, "that this was about the biggest and the worst in Europe. What in heaven's name can have induced him to come here?"

"I suppose nobody else would have a gift of him," said Julia. "And for that matter, I think we could have done without the monster very well."

"Oh, don't say that," returned Gideon. "This has been one of the most amusing experiences of my life."

"I don't think you'll forget it very soon," said Julia. "Your hand will remind you."

"Well, I suppose I must be going," said Gideon, reluctantly.

"No," pleaded Julia. "Why should you? Stay and have tea with me."

"If I thought you really wished me to stay," said Gideon, looking at his hat, "of course I should only be too delighted."

"What a silly person you must take me for!" returned the girl. "Why, of course I do; and besides I want some cakes for tea, and I've nobody to send. Here is the latch-key."

Gideon put on his hat with alacrity, and casting one look at Miss Hazeltine and another at the legs of Hercules, threw open the door and departed on his errand.

He returned with a large bag of the choicest and most tempting of cakes and tartlets, and found Julia in the act of spreading a small tea-table in the lobby.

"The rooms are all in such a state," she cried, "that I thought we should be more cosy and comfortable in our own lobby, and under our own vine and statuary."

"Ever so much better," cried Gideon, delightedly.

"Oh, what adorable cream tarts!" said Julia, opening the bag, "and the dearest little cherry tartlets, with all the cherries spilled out into the cream!"

"Yes," said Gideon, concealing his dismay, "I knew they would mix beautifully; the woman behind the counter told me so."

"Now," said Julia, as they began their little festival, "I am going to show you Morris's letter; read it aloud, please; perhaps there's something I have missed."

Gideon took the letter, and spreading it out on his knee, read as follows:

"DEAR JULIA: I write you from Browndean, where we are stopping over for a few days. Uncle was much shaken in that dreadful accident, of which, I dare say, you have seen the account. To-morrow I leave him here with John, and come up alone; but before that you will have received a barrel *containing specimens for a friend.* Do not open it on any account, but leave it in the lobby till I come.

"Yours in haste,

"M. FINSBURY.

"P.S.—Be sure and leave the barrel in the lobby."

"No," said Gideon, "there seems to be nothing about the monument," and he nodded as he spoke at the marble legs. "Miss Hazeltine," he continued, "would you mind me asking a few questions?"

"Certainly not," replied Julia; "and if you can make me understand why Morris has sent a statue of Hercules instead of a barrel containing specimens for a friend, I shall be grateful till my dying day. And what are specimens for a friend?"

"I haven't a guess," said Gideon. "Specimens are usually bits of stone, but rather smaller than our friend the monument. Still, that is not the point. Are you quite alone in this big house?"

"Yes, I am at present," returned Julia. "I came up before them to prepare the house, and get another servant. But I couldn't get one I liked."

"Then you are utterly alone," said Gideon in amazement. "Are you not afraid?"

"No," responded Julia, stoutly. "I don't see why I should be more afraid than you would be; I am weaker, of course, but when I found I must sleep alone in the house, I bought a revolver wonderfully cheap, and made the man show me how to use it."

"And how do you use it?" demanded Gideon, much amused at her courage.

"Why," said she, with a smile, "you pull the little trigger thing on top, and then pointing it very low, for it springs up as you fire, you pull the underneath little trigger thing, and it goes off as well as if a man had done it."

"And how often have you used it?" asked Gideon.

"Oh, I have not used it yet," said the determined young lady; "but I know how, and that makes me wonderfully courageous, especially when I barricade my door with a chest of drawers."

"I'm awfully glad they are coming back soon," said Gideon. "This business strikes me as excessively unsafe; if it goes on much longer, I could provide you with a maiden aunt of mine, or my landlady, if you preferred."

"Lend me an aunt!" cried Julia. "Oh, what generosity! I begin to think it must have been you that sent the Hercules."

"Believe me," cried the young man, "I admire you too much to send you such an infamous work of art."

Julia was beginning to reply, when they were both startled by a knocking at the door.

"Oh, Mr. Forsyth!"

"Don't be afraid, my dear girl," said Gideon, laying his hand tenderly on her arm.

"I know it's the police," she whispered. "They are coming to complain about the statue."

The knock was repeated. It was louder than before, and more impatient.

"It's Morris," cried Julia, in a startled voice, and she ran to the door and opened it.

It was indeed Morris that stood before them; not the Morris of ordinary days, but a wild-looking fellow, pale and haggard, with blood-shot eyes, and a two days' beard upon his chin.

"The barrel!" he cried. "Where's the barrel that came this morning?" and he stared about the lobby, his eyes, as they fell upon the legs of Hercules, literally goggling in his head. "What is that?" he screamed.

"What is that wax-work? Speak, you fool! What is that? and where's the barrel—the water-butt?"

"No barrel came, Morris," responded Julia, coldly. "This is the only thing that has arrived."

"This!" shrieked the miserable man. "I never heard of it!"

"It came addressed in your hand," replied Julia; "we had nearly to pull the house down to get it in, and that is all that I can tell you."

Morris gazed at her in utter bewilderment. He passed his hand over his forehead, he leaned against the wall like a man about to faint. Then his tongue was loosed, and he overwhelmed the girl with torrents of abuse. Such fire, such directness, such a choice of ungentlemanly language, none had ever before suspected Morris to possess; and the girl trembled and shrank before his fury.

"You shall not speak to Miss Hazeltine in that way," said Gideon, sternly. "It is what I will not suffer."

"I shall speak to the girl as I like," returned Morris, with a fresh outburst of anger. "I'll speak to the hussy as she deserves."

"Not a word more, sir, not one word," cried Gideon. "Miss Hazeltine," he continued, addressing the young girl, "you cannot stay a moment longer in the same house with this unmanly fellow. Here is my arm, let me take you where you will be secure from insult."

"Mr. Forsyth," returned Julia, "you are right, I cannot stay here longer, and I am sure I trust myself to an honourable gentleman."

Pale and resolute, Gideon offered her his arm, and the pair descended the steps, followed by Morris clamouring for the latch-key.

Julia had scarcely handed the key to Morris before an empty hansom drove smartly into John Street. It was hailed by both men, and as the cabman drew up his restive horse, Morris made a dash into the vehicle.

"Sixpence above fare," he cried, recklessly. "Waterloo station for your life. Sixpence for yourself!"

"Make it a shilling, Guv'ner," said the man, with a grin, "the other parties were first."

"A shilling then," cried Morris, with the inward reflection that he would reconsider it at Waterloo. The man whipped up his horse, and the hansom vanished from John Street.

CHAPTER VI

THE TRIBULATIONS OF MORRIS: PART THE FIRST

As the hansom span through the streets of London, Morris sought to rally the forces of his mind. The water-butt with the dead body had miscarried, and it was essential to recover it. So much was clear; and if, by some blest good-fortune, it was still at the station, all might be well. If it had been sent out, however, if it were already in the hands of some wrong person, matters looked more ominous. People who receive unexplained packages are usually keen to have them open; the example of Miss Hazeltine (whom he cursed again) was there to remind him of the circumstance; and if anyone had opened the water-butt—"Oh, Lord," cried Morris at the thought, and carried his hand to his damp forehead. The private conception of any breach of law is apt to be inspiriting, for the scheme (while yet inchoate) wears dashing and attractive colours. Not so in the least, that part of the criminal's later reflections which deal with the police. That useful corps (as Morris now began to think) had scarce been kept sufficiently in view when he embarked upon his enterprise. "I must play devilish close," he reflected, and he was aware of an exquisite thrill of fear in the region of the spine.

"Main line, or loop?" inquired the cabman, through the scuttle.

"Main line," replied Morris, and mentally decided that the man should have his shilling after all. "It would be madness to attract attention," thought he. "But what this thing will cost me, first and last, begins to be a nightmare!"

He passed through the booking office and wandered disconsolately on the platform. It was a breathing space in the day's traffic; there were few people there, and these for the most part quiescent on the benches. Morris seemed to attract no remark, which was a good thing; but, on the other hand, he was making no progress in his quest. Something must be done, something must be risked; every passing instant only added to his dangers. Summoning all his courage, he stopped a porter, and asked him if he remembered receiving a barrel by the morning train; he was anxious to get information, for the barrel belonged to a friend. "It is a matter of some moment," he added, "for it contains specimens."

"I was not here this morning, sir," responded the porter, somewhat reluctantly, "but I'll ask Bill. Do you recollect, Bill, to have got a barrel from Bournemouth this morning containing specimens?"

"I don't know about specimens," replied Bill; "but the party as received the barrel I mean, raised a sight of trouble."

"What's that?" cried Morris, in the agitation of the moment, pressing a penny into the man's hand.

"You see, sir, the barrel arrived at one thirty; no one claimed it till about three, when a small, sickly-looking gentleman (probably a curate) came up, and sez he, 'Have you got anything for Pitman,' or 'Will'm Bent

Pitman,' if I recollect right. 'I don't exactly know,' sez I, 'but I rather fancy that there barrel bears that name.' The little man went up to the barrel, and seemed regularly all took aback when he saw the address, and then he pitched into us for not having brought what he wanted. 'I don't care a damn what you want,' sez I to him, 'but if you are Will'm Bent Pitman, there's your barrel.'"

"Well, and did he take it?" cried the breathless Morris.

"Well, sir," returned Bill, "it appears it was a packing-case he was after. The packing-case came; that's sure enough, because it was about the biggest packing-case ever I clapped eyes on. And this Pitman he seemed a good deal cut up, and he had the superintendent out, and they got hold of the van-man — him as took the packing-case. Well, sir," continued Bill, with a smile, "I never see a man in such a state; everybody about that van was mortal, bar the horses. Some gen'leman (as well as I could make out) had given the van-man a sov; and so that was where the trouble come in, you see."

"But what did he say?" gasped Morris.

"I don't know as he *said* much, sir," said Bill. "But he offered to fight this Pitman for a pot of beer. He had lost his book, too, and the receipts; and his men were all as mortal as himself. Oh, they were all like—" and Bill paused for a simile — "like lords! the superintendent sacked them on the spot."

"Oh, come, but that's not so bad," said Morris, with a bursting sigh. "He couldn't tell where he took the packing-case, then?"

"Not he," said Bill, "nor yet nothink else."

"And what — what did Pitman do?" asked Morris.

"Oh, he went off with the barrel in a four-wheeler, very trembling like," replied Bill. "I don't believe he's a gentleman as has good health."

"Well, so the barrel's gone," said Morris, half to himself.

"You may depend on that, sir," returned the porter. "But you had better see the superintendent."

"Not in the least, it's of no account," said Morris. "It only contained specimens." And he walked hastily away.

Ensconced once more in a hansom, he proceeded to reconsider his position. Suppose (he thought), suppose he should accept defeat and declare his uncle's death at once? He should lose the tontine, and with that the last hope of his seven thousand eight hundred pounds. But on the other hand, since the shilling to the hansom cabman, he had begun to see that crime was expensive in its course, and since the loss of the water-butt, that it was uncertain in its consequences. Quietly at first, and then with growing heat, he reviewed the advantages of backing out. It involved a loss; but (come to think of it) no such great loss after all; only that of the tontine, which had been always a toss up, which at bottom he had never really expected. He reminded himself of that eagerly; he congratulated himself upon his constant moderation. He had never really expected the tontine; he had never even very definitely hoped to recover his seven thousand eight hundred pounds; he had been hurried into the whole thing by Michael's obvious dishonesty. Yes, it would probably be better to draw back from this high-flying venture, settle back on the leather business ——

"Great God!" cried Morris, bounding in the hansom like a Jack-in-a-box. "I have not only not gained the tontine — I have lost the leather business!"

Such was the monstrous fact. He had no power to sign; he could not draw a check for thirty shillings; until he could produce legal evidence of his uncle's death, he was a penniless outcast — and as soon as he produced it he had lost the tontine! There was no hesitation on the part of Morris; to drop the tontine like a hot chestnut, to concentrate all his forces on the leather business and the rest of his small but legitimate inheritance, was the decision of a single instant. And the next, the full extent of his calamity was suddenly disclosed to him. Declare his uncle's death? He couldn't! Since the body was lost, Joseph had (in a legal sense) become immortal.

There was no created vehicle big enough to contain Morris and his woes. He paid the hansom off and walked on he knew not whither.

"I seem to have gone into this business with too much precipitation," he reflected, with a deadly sigh. "I fear it seems too ramified for a person of my powers of mind."

And then a remark of his uncle's flashed into his memory: If you want to think clearly, put it all down on paper. "Well, the old boy knew a thing or two," said Morris. "I will try; but I don't believe the paper was ever made that will clear my mind."

He entered a place of public entertainment, ordered bread and cheese, and writing materials, and sat down before them heavily. He tried the pen; it was an excellent pen, but what was he to write? "I have it," cried Morris. "Robinson Crusoe and the double columns!" He prepared his paper after that classic model and began as follows:

Bad.	*Good.*
1. I have lost my uncle's body.	1. But then Pitman has found it.

"Stop a bit," said Morris, "I am letting the spirit of antithesis run away with me. Let's start again."

Bad.	*Good.*
1. I have lost my uncle's body.	1. But then I no longer require to bury it.
2. I have lost the tontine.	2. But I may still save that if Pitman disposes of the body, and if I can find a physician who will stick at nothing.
3. I have lost the leather business and the rest of my uncle's succession.	3. But not if Pitman gives the body up to the police.

"Oh, but in that case I go to jail; I had forgot that," thought Morris. "Indeed, I don't know that I had better dwell on that hypothesis at all; it's all very well to talk of facing the worst; but in a case of this kind, a man's first duty is to his own nerve. Is there any answer to No. 3? Is there any possible good side to such a beastly bungle? There must be, of course, or where would be the use of this double-entry business? And — by George, I have it!" he exclaimed; "it's exactly the same as the last!" And he hastily rewrote the passage.

Bad.	*Good.*
3. I have lost the leather business and the rest of my uncle's succession.	3. But not if I can find a physician who will stick at nothing.

"This venal doctor seems quite a desideratum," he reflected. "I want him first to give me a certificate that my uncle is dead, so that I may get the leather business; and then that he's alive — but here we are again at the incompatible interests!" And he returned to his tabulation.

Bad.	*Good.*
4. I have almost no money.	4. But there is plenty in the bank.
5. Yes, but I can't get the money in the bank.	5. But — well, that seems unhappily to be the case.
6. I have left the bill for eight hundred pounds in Uncle Joseph's pocket.	6. But if Pitman is only a dishonest man, the presence of this bill may lead him to keep the whole thing dark and throw the body into the New Cut.
7. Yes, but if Pitman is dishonest and finds the bill, he will know who Joseph is, and he may blackmail me.	7. Yes, but if I am right about Uncle Masterman, I can blackmail Michael.
8. But I can't blackmail Michael (which is, besides, a very dangerous thing to do) until I find out.	8. Worse luck!
9. The leather business will soon want money for current expenses, and I have none to give.	9. But the leather business is a sinking ship.
10. Yes, but it's all the ship I have.	10. A fact.
11. John will soon want money, and I have none to give.	11.
12. And the venal doctor will want money down.	12.
13. And if Pitman is dishonest and don't send me to jail, he will want a fortune.	13.

"Oh, this seems to be a very one-sided business."

exclaimed Morris. "There's not so much in this method as I was led to think." He crumpled the paper up and threw it down; and then, the next moment, picked it up again and ran it over. "It seems it's on the financial point that my position is weakest," he reflected. "Is there positively no way of raising the wind? In a vast city like this, and surrounded by all the resources of civilisation, it seems not to be conceived! Let us have no more precipitation. Is there nothing I can sell? My collection of signet—." But at the thought of scattering these beloved treasures, the blood leaped into Morris's cheek. "I would rather die!" he exclaimed, and cramming his hat upon his head, strode forth into the streets.

"I *must* raise funds," he thought. "My uncle being dead, the money in the bank is mine; or would be mine, but for the cursed injustice that has pursued me ever since I was an orphan in a Commercial Academy. I know what any other man would do; any other man in Christendom would forge; although I don't know why I call it forging, either, when Joseph's dead, and the funds are my own. When I think of that, when I think that my uncle is really as dead as mutton, and that I can't prove it, my gorge rises at the injustice of the whole affair. I used to feel bitterly about that seven thousand eight hundred pounds; it seems a trifle now! Dear me, why, the day before yesterday I was comparatively happy."

And Morris stood on the sidewalk and heaved another sobbing sigh.

"Then there's another thing," he resumed; "can I? Am I able? Why didn't I practise different handwritings while I was young? How a fellow regrets those lost opportunities when he grows up! But there's one comfort: it's not morally wrong; I can try it on with a clear conscience, and even if I was found out, I wouldn't greatly care — morally, I mean. And then, if I succeed, and if Pitman is staunch — there's nothing to do but find a venal doctor; and that ought to be simple enough in a place like London. By all accounts the town's alive with them. It wouldn't do, of course, to advertise for a corrupt physician; that would be impolitic. No, I suppose a fellow has simply to spot along the streets for a red lamp and herbs in the window, and then you go in and — and — and put it to him plainly; though it seems a delicate step."

He was near home now, after many devious wanderings, and turned up John Street. As he thrust his latch-key in the lock, another mortifying reflection struck him to the heart.

"Not even this house is mine till I can prove him dead," he snarled, and slammed the door behind him so that the windows in the attic rattled.

Night had long fallen; long ago the lamps and the shop-fronts had begun to glitter down the endless streets; the lobby was pitch-dark; and, as the devil would have it, Morris barked his shins and sprawled all his length over the pedestal of Hercules. The pain was sharp; his temper was already thoroughly undermined; by a last misfortune his hand closed on the hammer as he fell; and, in a spasm of childish irritation, he turned and struck at the offending statue. There was a splintering crash.

"O Lord, what have I done next?" wailed Morris;

and he groped his way to find a candle. "Yes," he reflected, as he stood with the light in his hand and looked upon the mutilated leg, from which about a pound of muscle was detached. "Yes, I have destroyed a genuine antique; I may be in for thousands!" And then there sprung up in his bosom a sort of angry hope. "Let me see," he thought. "Julia's got rid of; there's nothing to connect me with that beast, Forsyth; the men were all drunk, and (what's better) they've been all discharged. Oh, come, I think this is another case for moral courage! I'll deny all knowledge of the thing."

A moment more, and he stood again before the Hercules, his lips sternly compressed, the coal-axe and the meat-cleaver under his arm. The next, he had fallen upon the packing-case. This had been already seriously undermined by the operations of Gideon; a few well-directed blows, and it already quaked and gaped; yet a few more, and it fell about Morris in a shower of boards followed by an avalanche of straw.

And now the leather merchant could behold the nature of his task; and at the first sight his spirit quailed. It was indeed, no more ambitious a task for De Lesseps, with all his men and horses, to attack the hills of Panama, than for a single, slim young gentleman, with no previous experience of labour in a quarry, to measure himself against that bloated monster on his pedestal. And yet the pair were well encountered: on the one side, bulk — on the other, genuine heroic fire.

"Down you shall come, you great big ugly brute!" cried Morris aloud, with something of that passion which swept the Parisian mob against the walls of the

Bastille. "Down you shall come, this night. I'll have none of you in my lobby."

The face, from its indecent expression, had particularly animated the zeal of our iconoclast; and it was against the face that he began his operations. The great height of the demigod — for he stood a fathom and half in his stocking feet — offered a preliminary obstacle to this attack. But here, in the first skirmish of the battle, intellect already began to triumph over matter. By means of a pair of library steps, the injured householder gained a posture of advantage; and with great swipes of the coal-axe, proceeded to decapitate the brute.

Two hours later, what had been the erect image of a gigantic coal-porter turned miraculously white, was now no more than a medley of disjected members: the quadragenarian torso prone against the pedestal; the lascivious countenance leering down the kitchen stair; the legs, the arms, the hands, and even the fingers, scattered broadcast on the lobby floor. Half an hour more, and all the débris had been laboriously carted to the kitchen; and Morris, with a gentle sentiment of triumph, looked round upon the scene of his achievements. Yes, he could deny all knowledge of it now: the lobby, beyond the fact that it was partly ruinous, betrayed no trace of the passage of Hercules. But it was a weary Morris that crept up to bed; his arms and shoulders ached, the palms of his hands burned from the rough kisses of the coal-axe, and there was one smarting finger that stole continually to his mouth. Sleep long delayed to visit the dilapidated hero, and with the first peep of day it had again deserted him.

The morning, as though to accord with his disastrous fortunes, dawned inclemently. An easterly gale was shouting in the streets; flaws of rain angrily assailed the windows; and as Morris dressed, the draught from the fireplace vividly played about his legs.

"I think," he could not help observing, bitterly, "that with all I have to bear, they might have given me decent weather."

There was no bread in the house, for Miss Hazeltine (like all women left to themselves) had subsisted entirely upon cake. But some of this was found, and (along with what the poets call a glass of fair, cold water) made up a semblance of a morning meal. And then down he sat undauntedly to his delicate task.

Nothing can be more interesting than the study of signatures, written (as they are) before meals and after, during indigestion and intoxication; written when the signer is trembling for the life of his child, or has come from winning the Derby, in his lawyer's office, or under the bright eyes of his sweetheart. To the vulgar, these seem never the same; but to the expert, the bank clerk, or the lithographer, they are constant quantities and as recognisable as the North Star to the night-watch on deck.

To all this Morris was alive. In the theory of that graceful art in which he was now embarking, our spirited leather merchant was beyond all reproach. But happily for the investor, forgery is an affair of practice. And as Morris sat surrounded by examples of his uncle's signature, and his own incompetence, insidious depression stole upon his spirits. From time to time the wind wuthered in the chimney at his back; from time to time there swept over Bloomsbury a squall so dark that he must rise and light the gas; about him was the chill and the mean disorder of a house out of commission — the floor bare, the sofa heaped with books and accounts enveloped in a dirty table-cloth, the pens rusted, the paper glazed with a thick film of dust; and yet these were but adminicles of misery, and the true root of his depression lay round him on the table in the shape of misbegotten forgeries.

"It's one of the strangest things I ever heard of," he complained. "It almost seems as if it was a talent that I didn't possess." He went once more minutely through his proofs. "A clerk would simply gibe at them," said he. "Well, there's nothing else but tracing possible."

He waited till a squall had passed and there came a blink of scowling daylight. Then he went to the window, and in the face of all John Street traced his uncle's signature. It was a poor thing at the best. "But it must do," said he, as he stood gazing wofully on his handiwork. "He's dead anyway." And he filled up the cheque for a couple of a hundred and sallied forth for the Anglo-Patagonian Bank.

There, at the desk at which he was accustomed to transact business, and with as much indifference as he could assume, Morris presented the forged cheque to the big, red-bearded Scots teller. The teller seemed to view it with surprise; and as he turned it this way and that, and even scrutinised the signature with a magnifying glass, his surprise appeared to warm into disfavour. Begging to be excused for a moment, he passed away into the rearmost quarters of the bank; whence, after an appreciable interval, he returned again in earnest talk with a superior, an oldish and a baldish, but a very gentlemanly man.

"Mr. Morris Finsbury, I believe," said the gentlemanly man, fixing Morris with a pair of double eyeglasses.

"That is my name," said Morris, quavering. "Is there anything wrong?"

"Well, the fact is, Mr. Finsbury, you see we are rather surprised at receiving this," said the other, flicking at the cheque. "There are no effects."

"No effects?" cried Morris. "Why, I know myself there must be eight and twenty hundred pounds, if there's a penny."

"Two seven six four, I think," replied the gentlemanly man; "but it was drawn yesterday."

"Drawn!" cried Morris.

"By your uncle himself, sir," continued the other. "Not only that, but we discounted a bill for him for—let me see—how much was it for, Mr. Bell?"

"Eight hundred, Mr. Judkin," replied the teller.

"Dent Pitman!" cried Morris, staggering back.

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Judkin.

"It's—it's only an expletive," said Morris.

"I hope there's nothing wrong, Mr. Finsbury," said Mr. Bell.

"All I can tell you," said Morris, with a harsh laugh, "is that the whole thing's impossible. My uncle is at Bournemouth, unable to move."

"Really!" cried Mr. Bell, and he recovered the cheque from Mr. Judkin. "But this cheque is dated in London, and to-day," he observed. "How d'ye account for that, sir?"

"Oh, that was a mistake," said Morris, and a deep tide of colour dyed his face and neck.

"No doubt, no doubt," said Mr. Judkin, but he looked at his customer inquiringly.

"And—and—," resumed Morris, "even if there were no effects—this is a very trifling sum to overdraw—our firm—the name of Finsbury is surely good enough for such a wretched sum as this."

"No doubt, Mr. Finsbury," returned Mr. Judkin; "and if you insist I will take it into consideration; but I hardly think—in short, Mr. Finsbury, if there had been nothing else, the signature seems hardly all that we could wish."

"That's of no consequence," replied Morris, nervously. "I'll get my uncle to sign another. The fact is," he went on, with a bold stroke, "my uncle is so far from well at present that he was unable to sign this cheque without assistance, and I fear that my holding the pen for him may have made the difference in the signature."

Mr. Judkin shot a keen glance into Morris's face; and then turned and looked at Mr. Bell.

"Well," he said, "it seems as if we have been victimised by a swindler. Pray tell Mr. Finsbury we shall put detectives on at once. As for this cheque of yours, I regret that, owing to the way it was signed, the bank can hardly consider it—what shall I say?—business-like," and he returned the cheque across the counter.

Morris took it up mechanically, he was thinking of something very different.

"In a case of this kind," he began, "I believe the loss falls on us; I mean upon my uncle and myself."

"It does not, sir," replied Mr. Bell; "the bank is responsible, and the bank will either recover the money or refund it, you may depend on that."

Morris's face fell; then it was visited by another gleam of hope.

"I'll tell you what," he said, "you leave this entirely in my hands. I'll sift the matter. I've an idea, at any rate; and detectives," he added appealingly, "are so expensive."

"The bank would not hear of it," returned Mr. Judkin. "The bank stands to lose between three and four thousand pounds; it will spend as much more if necessary. An undiscovered forger is a permanent danger. We shall clear it up to the bottom, Mr. Finsbury, set your mind at rest on that."

"Then I'll stand the loss," said Morris, boldly. "I order you to abandon the search." He was determined that no inquiry should be made.

"I beg your pardon," returned Mr. Judkin, "but we have nothing to do with you in this matter, which is one between your uncle and ourselves. If he should take this opinion, and will either come here himself or will let me see him in his sick-room——"

"Quite impossible," cried Morris.

"Well then, you see," said Mr. Judkin, "how my hands are tied. The whole affair must go at once into the hands of the police."

Morris mechanically folded the cheque and restored it to his pocket-book.

"Good-morning," said he, and scrambled somehow out of the bank.

"I don't know what they suspect," he reflected, "I can't make them out, their whole behaviour is thoroughly unbusiness-like. But it doesn't matter: all's up with everything. The money has been paid; the police are on the scent; in two hours, that idiot Pitman will be nabbed — and the whole story of the dead body in the evening papers."

If he could have heard what passed in the bank after his departure, he would have been less alarmed, perhaps more mortified.

"That was a curious affair, Mr. Bell," said Mr. Judkin.

"Yes, sir," said Mr. Bell, "but I think we have given him a fright."

"Oh, we shall hear no more of Mr. Morris Finsbury," returned the other; "it was a first attempt, and the house have dealt with us so long that I was anxious to deal gently. But I suppose, Mr. Bell, there can be no mistake about yesterday? It was old Mr. Finsbury himself?"

"There could be no possible doubt of that," said Mr. Bell, with a chuckle. "He explained to me the principles of banking."

"Well, well," said Mr. Judkin. "The next time he calls, ask him to step into my room. It is only proper he should be warned."

CHAPTER VII

IN WHICH WILLIAM DENT PITMAN TAKES LEGAL ADVICE

NORFOLK STREET, King's Road — jocularly known among Mr. Pitman's lodgers as "Norfolk Island," is neither a long, a handsome, nor a pleasing thoroughfare. Dirty, undersized maids-of-all-work issue from it in pursuit of beer, or linger on its sidewalk listening to the voice of love. The cat's-meat man passes twice a day. An occasional organ-grinder wanders in and wanders out again, disgusted. In holiday time the street is the arena of the young bloods of the neighbourhood, and the householders have an opportunity of studying the manly art of self-defence. And yet Norfolk Street has one claim to be respectable, for it contains not a single shop — unless you count the public house at the corner, which is really in the King's Road.

The door of No. 7 bore a brass plate inscribed with the legend "W. D. Pitman, Artist." It was not a particularly clean brass plate, nor was No. 7 itself a particularly inviting place of residence. And yet it had a character of its own, such as may well quicken the pulse of the reader's curiosity. For here was the home of an artist — and a distinguished artist too, highly distinguished by his ill-success — which had never been made the subject of an article in the illustrated magazines. No wood-engraver had ever reproduced "a corner in the back drawing-room" or "the studio mantelpiece" of No. 7; no young lady author had ever commented on "the unaffected simplicity" with which Mr. Pitman received her in the midst of his "treasures." It is an omission I would gladly supply, but our business is only with the backward parts and "abject rear" of this æsthetic dwelling.

Here was a garden, boasting a dwarf fountain (that never played) in the centre, a few grimy-looking flowers in pots, two or three newly-planted trees which the spring of Chelsea visited without noticeable consequence, and two or three statues after the antique, representing satyrs and nymphs in the worst possible style of sculptured art. On one side, the garden was over-shadowed by a pair of crazy studios, usually hired out to the more obscure and youthful practitioners of British art. Opposite these another lofty out-building, somewhat more carefully finished, and boasting of a communication with the house and a private door on the back lane, enshrined the multifarious industry of Mr. Pitman. All day, it is true, he was engaged in the work of education at a seminary for young ladies; but the evenings at least were his own, and these he would prolong far into the night, now dashing off *A landscape with waterfall* in oil, now a volunteer bust ("in marble," as he would gently but proudly observe) of some public character, now stooping his chisel to a mere *nymph* ("for a gas-bracket on a stair, sir"), or a life-size *Infant Samuel* for a religious nursery. Mr. Pitman had studied in Paris, and he had studied in Rome, supplied with funds by a fond parent who went subsequently bankrupt, in consequence of a fall in corsets; and though he was never thought to have the smallest modicum of talent, it was at one time supposed that he had learned his business. Eighteen years of what is called "tuition" had relieved him of the dangerous knowledge. His artist lodgers would sometimes reason with him; they would point out to him how impossible it was to paint by gaslight, or to sculpture life-sized nymphs without a model.

"I know that," he would reply. "No one in Norfolk Street knows it better; and if I were rich I should certainly employ the best models in London; but being poor, I have taught myself to do without them. An occasional model would only disturb my ideal conception of the figure, and be a positive impediment in my career. As for painting by an artificial light," he would continue, "that is simply a knack I have found it necessary to acquire, my days being engrossed in the work of tuition."

At the moment when we must present him to our readers, Pitman was in his studio alone, by the dying light of the October day. He sat (sure enough with "unaffected simplicity") in a Windsor chair, his low-crowned black felt hat by his side; a dark, weak, harmless, pathetic little man, clad in the hue of mourning, his coat longer than is usual with the laity, his neck enclosed in a collar without a parting, his neckcloth pale in hue and simply tied; the whole outward man, except for a pointed beard, tentatively clerical. There was a thinning on the top of Pitman's head, there were silver hairs at Pitman's temple; poor gentleman, he was no longer young; and years, and poverty, and humble ambition thwarted, make a cheerless lot.

In front of him, in the corner by the door, there stood a portly barrel; and let him turn them where he might, it was always to the barrel that his eyes and his thoughts returned.

"Should I open it? Should I return it? Should I communicate with Mr. Semitopolis at once?" he wondered. "No," he concluded finally, "nothing without Mr. Finsbury's advice." And he arose and produced a shabby leathern desk. It opened without the formality of unlocking, and displayed the thick cream-coloured note paper on which Mr. Pitman was in the habit of communicating with the proprietors of schools and the parents of his pupils. He placed the desk on the table by the window, and taking a saucer of Indian ink from the chimney-piece, laboriously composed the following letter:

"My dear Mr. Finsbury," it ran, "would it be presuming on your kindness if I asked you to pay me a visit here this evening? It is in no trifling matter that I invoke your valuable assistance, for need I say more than it concerns the welfare of Mr. Semitopolis's statue of Hercules? I write you in great agitation of mind; for I have made all inquiries, and greatly fear that this work of ancient art has been mislaid. I labour besides under another perplexity, not unconnected with the first. Pray excuse the inelegance of this scrawl, and believe me yours in haste, William D. Pitman."

Armed with this he set forth and rang the bell of No. 233 King's Road, the private residence of Michael Finsbury. He had met the lawyer at a time of great public excitement in Chelsea; Michael, who had a sense of humour and a great deal of careless kindness in his nature, followed the acquaintance up, and having come to laugh, remained to drop into a contemptuous kind of friendship. By this time, which was four years after the first meeting, Pitman was the lawyer's dog.

"No," said the elderly housekeeper who opened the door in person, "Mr. Michael's not in yet. But ye're looking terrible poorly, Mr. Pitman. Take a glass of sherry, sir, to cheer ye up."

"No, I thank you, ma'am," replied the artist. "It is very good in you, but I scarcely feel in sufficient spirits for sherry. Just give Mr. Finsbury this note, and ask him to look round—to the door in the lane, you will please tell him; I shall be in the studio all evening."

And he turned again into the street and walked slowly homeward. A hair-dresser's window caught his attention, and he stared long and earnestly at the proud, high-born, waxen lady in evening dress, who circulated in the centre of the show. The artist woke in him, in spite of his troubles.

"It is all very well to run down the men who make these things," he cried, "but there's a something—there's a haughty, indefinable something about that figure. It's what I tried for in my *Empress Eugénie,*" he added, with a sigh.

And he went home reflecting on the quality. "They don't teach you that direct appeal in Paris," he thought. "It's British. Come, I am going to sleep, I must wake up, I must aim higher—aim higher," cried the little artist to himself. All through his tea and afterward, as he was giving his eldest boy a lesson on the fiddle, his mind dwelt no longer on his troubles, but he was wrapt into the better land; and no sooner was he at liberty than he hastened with positive exhilaration to his studio.

Not even the sight of the barrel could entirely cast him down. He flung himself with rising zest into his work — a bust of Mr. Gladstone from a photograph; turned (with extraordinary success) the difficulty of the back of the head, for which he had no documents beyond a hazy recollection of a public meeting; delighted himself by his treatment of the collar; and was only recalled to the cares of life by Michael Finsbury's rattle at the door.

"Well, what's wrong?" said Michael, advancing to the grate where, knowing his friend's delight in a bright fire, Mr. Pitman had not spared the fuel. "I suppose you have come to grief somehow."

"There is no expression strong enough," said the artist. "Mr. Semitopolis's statue has not turned up, and I am afraid I shall be answerable for the money; but I think nothing of that — what I fear, my dear Mr. Finsbury, what I fear — alas, that I should have to say it! — is exposure. The Hercules was to be smuggled out of Italy; a thing positively wrong, a thing in which a man of my principles and in my responsible position should have taken (as I now see too late) no part whatever."

"This sounds like very serious work," said the lawyer. "It will require a great deal of drink, Pitman."

"I took the liberty of — in short, of being prepared for you," replied the artist, pointing to a kettle, a bottle of gin, a lemon, and glasses.

Michael mixed himself a grog, and offered the artist a cigar.

"No, thank you," said Pitman. "I used occasionally to be rather partial to it, but the smell is so disagreeable about the clothes."

"All right," said the lawyer. "I am comfortable now. Unfold your tale."

At some length, Pitman set forth his sorrows. He had gone to-day to Waterloo, expecting to receive the colossal Hercules, and he had received instead a barrel not big enough to hold Discobolus; yet the barrel was addressed in the hand (with which he was perfectly acquainted) of his Roman correspondent. What was stranger still, a case had arrived by the same train, large enough and heavy enough to contain the Hercules; and this case had been taken to an address now undiscoverable. "The van man (I regret to say it) had been drinking, and his language was such as I could never bring myself to repeat. He was at once discharged by the superintendent of the line, who behaved most properly throughout and is to make inquiries at Southampton. In the meanwhile, what was I to do? I left my address and brought the barrel home; but remembering an old adage, I determined not to open it except in the presence of my lawyer."

"Is that all?" asked Michael. "I don't see any cause to worry. The Hercules has stuck upon the road. It will drop in to-morrow or the day after; and as for the barrel, depend upon it, it's a testimonial from one of your young ladies, and probably contains oysters."

"Oh, don't speak so loud!" cried the little artist. "It would cost me my place if I were heard to speak lightly of the young ladies, and besides, why oysters from Italy? and why should they come to me addressed in Signor Ricardi's hand?"

"Well, let's have a look at it," said Michael. "Let's roll it forward to the light."

The two men rolled the barrel from the corner, and stood it on end before the fire.

"It's heavy enough to be oysters," remarked Michael, judiciously.

"Shall we open it at once?" inquired the artist, who had grown decidedly cheerful under the combined effects of company and gin; and without waiting for a reply, he began to strip as if for a prize-fight, tossed his clerical collar in the waste-paper basket, hung his clerical coat upon a nail, and with a chisel in one hand and a hammer in the other, struck the first blow of the evening.

"That's the style, William Dent!" cried Michael. "There's fire for your money! It may be a romantic visit from one of the young ladies — a sort of Cleopatra business. Have a care, and don't stave in Cleopatra's head."

But the sight of Pitman's alacrity was infectious. The lawyer could sit still no longer. Tossing his cigar into the fire, he snatched the instrument from the unwilling hands of the artist, and fell to himself. Soon the sweat stood in beads upon his large, fair brow; his stylish trousers were defaced with iron rust, and the state of his chisel testified to misdirected energies.

A cask is not an easy thing to open, even when you set about it in the right way; when you set about it wrongly, the whole structure must be resolved into its elements. Such was the course pursued alike by the artist and the lawyer. Presently the last hoop had been removed — a couple of smart blows tumbled the staves upon the ground — and what had once been a barrel was no more than a confused heap of broken and distorted boards.

In the midst of these, a certain dismal something, swathed in blankets, remained for an instant upright, and then toppled to one side and heavily collapsed before the fire. Even as the thing subsided, an eyeglass tingled to the floor and rolled toward the screaming Pitman.

"Hold your tongue!" said Michael. He dashed to the house door and locked it; then, with a pale face and bitten lip, he drew near, pulled aside a corner of the swathing blanket, and recoiled, shuddering.

There was a long silence in the studio.

"Now tell me," said Michael, in a low voice: "Had you any hand in it?" and he pointed to the body.

The little artist could only utter broken and disjointed sounds.

Michael poured some gin into a glass. "Drink that," he said. "Don't be afraid of me. I'm your friend through thick and thin."

Pitman put the liquor down untasted.

"I swear before God," he said, "this is another mystery to me. In my worst fears, I never dreamed of such a thing. I would not lay a finger on a sucking infant."

"That's all square," said Michael, with a sigh of huge relief. "I believe you, old boy." And he shook the artist warmly by the hand. "I thought for a moment," he added, with rather a ghastly smile, "I thought for a moment you might have made way with Mr. Semitopolis."

"It would make no difference if I had," groaned Pitman. "All is at an end for me. There's the writing on the wall."

"To begin with," said Michael, "let's get him out of sight; for to be quite plain with you, Pitman, I don't like your friend's appearance." And with that the lawyer shuddered. "Where can we put it?"

"You might put it in the closet there—if you could bear to touch it," answered the artist.

"Somebody has to do it, Pitman," returned the lawyer; "and it seems as if it had to be me. You go over to the table, turn your back, and mix me a grog; that's a fair division of labour."

About ninety seconds later, the closet door was heard to shut.

"There," observed Michael, "that's more home-like. You can turn now, my pallid Pitman. Is this the grog?" he ran on. "Heaven forgive you, it's a lemonade!"

"But oh, Finsbury, what are we to do with it?" wailed the artist, laying a clutching hand upon the lawyer's arm.

"Do with it?" repeated Michael. "Bury it in one of your flower-beds, and erect one of your own statues for a monument. I tell you we should look devilish romantic shovelling out the sod by the moon's pale ray. Here, put some gin in this."

"I beg of you, Mr. Finsbury, do not trifle with my misery," cried Pitman. "You see before you a man who has been all his life—I do not hesitate to say it—eminently respectable. Even in this solemn hour I can lay my hand upon my heart without a blush. Except on the really trifling point of the smuggling of the Hercules (and even of that I now humbly repent), my life has been entirely fit for publication. I never feared the light," cried the little man; "and now—now—!"

"Cheer up, old boy," said Michael. "I assure you we should count this little contretemps a trifle at the office; it's the sort of thing that may occur to anyone; and if you're perfectly sure you had no hand in it——"

"What language am I to find——" began Pitman.

"Oh, I'll do that part of it," interrupted Michael, "you have no experience. But the point is this: If—or rather since—you know nothing of the crime, since the—the party in the closet—is neither your father, nor your brother, nor your creditor, nor your mother-in-law, nor what they call an injured husband——"

"Oh, my dear sir!" interjected Pitman, horrified.

"Since, in short," continued the lawyer, "you had no possible interest in the crime, we have a perfectly free field before us and a safe game to play. Indeed the problem is really entertaining; it is one I have long contemplated in the light of an A. B. case; here it is at last under my hand in specie; and I mean to pull you through. Do you hear that?—I mean to pull you through. Let me see: it's a long time since I have had what I call a genuine holiday; I'll send an excuse tomorrow to the office. We had best be lively," he added, significantly; "for we must not spoil the market for the other man."

"What do you mean?" inquired Pitman. "What other man? The inspector of police?"

"Damn the inspector of police!" remarked his companion. "If you won't take the short cut and bury this in your back garden, we must find someone who will bury it in his. We must place the affair, in short, in the hands of someone of fewer scruples and more resources."

"A private detective, perhaps?" suggested Pitman.

"There are times when you fill me with pity," observed the lawyer. "By the way, Pitman," he added, in another key, "I have always regretted that you have no piano in this den of yours. Even if you don't play yourself, your friends might like to entertain themselves with a little music while you were mudding."

"I shall get one at once if you like," said Pitman, nervously, anxious to please. "I play the fiddle a little as it is."

"I know you do," said Michael; "but what's the fiddle — above all as you play it? What you want is polyphonic music. And I'll tell you what it is, since it's too late for you to buy a piano I'll give you mine."

"Thank you," said the artist, blankly. "You will give me yours? I am sure it's very good in you."

"Yes, I'll give you mine," continued Michael, "for the inspector of police to play on while his men are digging up your back garden."

Pitman stared at him in pained amazement.

"No, I'm not insane," Michael went on. "I'm playful but quite coherent. See here, Pitman; follow me one half minute. I mean to profit by the refreshing fact that we are really and truly innocent; nothing but the presence of the — you know what — connects us with the crime; once let us get rid of it, no matter how, and there is no possible clue to trace us by. Well, I give you my piano; we'll bring it round this very night. To-morrow, we rip the fittings out, deposit the — our friend — inside, plump the whole on a cart, and carry it to the chambers of a young gentleman whom I know by sight."

"Whom you know by sight?" repeated Pitman.

"And what is more to the purpose," continued

Michael, "whose chambers I know better than he does himself. A friend of mine — I call him my friend for brevity; he is now, I understand, in Demerara and (most likely) in jail — was the previous occupant. I defended him, and I got him off too — all saved but honour; his assets were nil, but he gave me what he had, poor gentleman, and along with the rest — the key of his chambers. It's there that I propose to leave the piano and, shall we say, Cleopatra?"

"It seems very wild," said Pitman. "And what will become of the poor young gentleman whom you know by sight?"

"It will do him good," said Michael, cheerily. "Just what he wants to steady him."

"But, my dear sir, he might be involved in a charge of — a charge of murder," gulped the artist.

"Well, he'll be just where we are," returned the lawyer. "He's innocent, you see. What hangs people, my dear Pitman, is the unfortunate circumstance of guilt."

"But indeed, indeed," pleaded Pitman, "the whole scheme appears to me so wild. Would it not be safer, after all, just to send for the police?"

"And make a scandal?" inquired Michael. "'The Chelsea Mystery; alleged innocence of Pitman?' How would that do at the Seminary?"

"It would imply my discharge," admitted the drawing-master. "I cannot deny that."

"And besides," said Michael, "I am not going to embark in such a business and have no fun for my money."

"Oh, my dear sir, is that a proper spirit?" cried Pitman.

"Oh, I only said that to cheer you up," said the unabashed Michael. "Nothing like a little judicious levity. But it's quite needless to discuss. If you mean to follow my advice, come on, and let us get the piano at once. If you don't, just drop me the word, and I'll leave you to deal with the whole thing according to your better judgment."

"You know perfectly well that I depend on you entirely," returned Pitman. "But oh, what a night is before me with that — horror in my studio! How am I to think of it on my pillow?"

"Well, you know, my piano will be there too," said Michael. "That'll raise the average."

An hour later a cart came up the lane, and the lawyer's piano — a momentous Broadwood grand — was deposited in Mr. Pitman's studio.

CHAPTER VIII

IN WHICH MICHAEL FINSBURY ENJOYS A HOLIDAY

PUNCTUALLY at eight o'clock next morning the lawyer rattled (according to previous appointment) on the studio door. He found the artist sadly altered for the worse — bleached, bloodshot, and chalky — a man upon wires, the tail of his haggard eye still wandering to the closet. Nor was the professor of drawing less inclined to wonder at his friend. Michael was usually attired in the height of fashion, with a certain mercantile brilliancy best described perhaps as stylish; nor could anything be said against him, as a rule, but that he looked a trifle too like a wedding guest to be quite a gentleman. To-day he had fallen altogether from these heights. He wore a flannel shirt of washed-out shepherd's tartan, and a suit of reddish tweeds, of the colour known to tailors as "heather mixture;" his neckcloth was black, and tied loosely in a sailor's knot; a rusty ulster partly concealed these advantages; and his feet were shod with rough walking boots. His hat was an old soft felt, which he removed with a flourish as he entered.

"Here I am, William Dent!" he cried, and drawing from his pocket two little wisps of reddish hair, he held them to his cheeks like side-whiskers and danced about the studio with the filmy graces of a ballet-girl.

Pitman laughed sadly. "I should never have known you," said he.

"Nor were you intended to," returned Michael, replacing his false whiskers in his pocket. "Now we must overhaul you and your wardrobe, and disguise you up to the nines."

"Disguise!" cried the artist. "Must I indeed disguise myself? Has it come to that?"

"My dear creature," returned his companion, "disguise is the spice of life. What is life, passionately exclaimed the French philosopher, without the pleasures of disguise? I don't say it's always good taste, and I know it's unprofessional; but what's the odds, down-hearted drawing-master? It has to be. We have to leave a false impression on the minds of many persons, and in particular on the mind of Mr. Gideon Forsyth — the young gentleman I know by sight — if he should have the bad taste to be at home."

"If he be at home?" faltered the artist. "That would be the end of all."

"Won't matter a d——," returned Michael, airily. "Let me see your clothes, and I'll make a new man of you in a jiffy."

In the bedroom, to which he was at once conducted, Michael examined Pitman's poor and scanty wardrobe with a humorous eye, picked out a short jacket of black alpaca, and presently added to that a pair of summer trousers which somehow took his fancy as incongruous. Then, with the garments in his hand, he scrutinised the artist closely.

"I don't like that clerical collar," he remarked. "Have you nothing else?"

The professor of drawing pondered for a moment, and then brightened; "I have a pair of low-necked shirts," he said, "that I used to wear in Paris as a student. They are rather loud."

"The very thing!" ejaculated Michael. "You look perfectly beastly. Here are spats, too," he continued, drawing forth a pair of those offensive little gaiters. "Must have spats! And now you jump into these, and whistle a tune at the window for (say) three-quarters of an hour. After that you can rejoin me on the field of glory."

So saying Michael returned to the studio. It was the morning of the easterly gale; the wind blew shrilly among the statues in the garden, and drove the rain upon the skylight in the studio ceiling; and at about the same moment of time when Morris attacked the hundredth version of his uncle's signature in Bloomsbury, Michael, in Chelsea, began to rip the wires out of the Broadwood grand.

Three-quarters of an hour later Pitman was admitted to find the closet-door standing open, the closet untenanted, and the piano discreetly shut.

"It's a remarkably heavy instrument," observed Michael, and turned to consider his friend's disguise. "You must shave off that beard of yours," he said.

"My beard!" cried Pitman. "I cannot shave my beard. I cannot tamper with my appearance — my principals would object. They hold very strong views as to the appearance of the professors — young ladies are considered so romantic. My beard was regarded as quite a feature when I went about the place. It was regarded," said the artist, with rising colour, "it was regarded as unbecoming."

"You can let it grow again," returned Michael, "and then you'll be so precious ugly that they'll raise your salary."

"But I don't want to look ugly," cried the artist.

"Don't be an ass," said Michael, who hated beards and was delighted to destroy one. "Off with it like a man!"

"Of course, if you insist," said Pitman; and then he sighed, fetched some hot water from the kitchen, and setting a glass upon his easel, first clipped his beard with scissors and then shaved his chin. He could not conceal from himself, as he regarded the result, that his last claims to manhood had been sacrificed, but Michael seemed delighted.

"A new man, I declare!" he cried. "When I give you the window-glass spectacles I have in my pocket, you'll be the beau ideal of a French commercial traveller."

Pitman did not reply, but continued to gaze disconsolately on his image in the glass.

"Do you know," asked Michael, "what the Governor of South Carolina said to the Governor of North Carolina? 'It's a long time between drinks,' observed that powerful thinker; and if you will put your hand into the top left-hand pocket of my ulster, I have an impression you will find a flask of brandy. Thank you, Pitman," he added, as he filled out a glass for each. "Now you will give me news of this."

The artist reached out his hand for the water-jug, but Michael arrested the movement.

"Not if you went upon your knees!" he cried. "This is the finest liqueur brandy in Great Britain."

Pitman put his lips to it, set it down again, and sighed.

"Well, I must say you're the poorest companion for a holiday!" cried Michael. "If that's all you know of brandy, you shall have no more of it; and while I finish the flask, you may as well begin business. Come to think of it," he broke off, "I have made an abominable error: you should have ordered the cart before you were disguised. Why, Pitman, what the devil's the use of you? why couldn't you have reminded me of that?"

"I never even knew there was a cart to be ordered," said the artist. "But I can take off the disguise again," he suggested eagerly.

"You would find it rather a bother to put on your beard," observed the lawyer. "No, it's a false step; the sort of thing that hangs people," he continued, with eminent cheerfulness, as he sipped his brandy; "and it can't be retraced now. Off to the mews with you, make all the arrangements; they're to take the piano from here, cart it to Victoria, and despatch it thence by rail to Cannon Street, to lie till called for in the name of Fortuné du Boisgobey."

"Isn't that rather an awkward name?" pleaded Pitman.

"Awkward?" cried Michael, scornfully. "It would hang us both! Brown is both safer and easier to pronounce. Call it Brown."

"I wish," said Pitman, "for my sake, I wish you wouldn't talk so much of hanging."

"Talking about it's nothing, my boy!" returned Michael. "But take your hat and be off, and mind and pay everything beforehand."

Left to himself, the lawyer turned his attention for some time exclusively to the liqueur brandy, and his spirits, which had been pretty fair all morning, now prodigiously rose. He proceeded to adjust his whiskers finally before the glass. "Devilish rich," he remarked, as he contemplated his reflection; "I look like a purser's mate." And at that moment, the window-glass spectacles (which he had hitherto destined for Pitman) flashed into his mind; he put them on, and fell in love with the effect. "Just what I required," he said. "I wonder what I look like now? A humorous novelist, I should think," and he began to practise divers characters of walk, naming them to himself as he proceeded. "Walk of a humorous novelist — but that would require an umbrella. Walk of a purser's mate. Walk of an Australian colonist revisiting the scenes of childhood. Walk of Sepoy colonel, ditto, ditto." And in the midst of the Sepoy colonel (which was an excellent assumption, although inconsistent with the style of his make-up), his eye lighted on the piano. This instrument was made to lock both at the top and at the keyboard, but the key of the latter had been mislaid. Michael opened it and ran his fingers over the dumb keys. "Fine instrument — full, rich tone," he observed, and he drew in a seat.

When Mr. Pitman returned to the studio, he was appalled to observe his guide, philosopher, and friend performing miracles of execution on the silent grand.

"Heaven help me!" thought the little man, "I fear he has been drinking! Mr. Finsbury," he said aloud;

and Michael, without rising, turned upon him a countenance somewhat flushed, encircled with the bush of the red whiskers, and bestridden by the spectacles. "Capriccio in B-flat on the departure of a friend," said he, continuing his noiseless evolutions.

Indignation awoke in the mind of Pitman. "Those spectacles were to be mine," he cried. "They are an essential part of my disguise."

"I am going to wear them myself," replied Michael; and he added, with some show of truth, "there would be a devil of a lot of suspicion aroused if we both wore spectacles."

"Oh, well," said the assenting Pitman, "I rather counted on them; but of course, if you insist! And at any rate, here is the cart at the door."

While the men were at work, Michael concealed himself in the closet among the débris of the barrel and the wires of the piano; and as soon as the coast was clear, the pair sallied forth by the lane, jumped into a hansom in the King's Road, and were driven rapidly toward town. It was still cold and raw and boisterous; the rain beat strongly in their faces, but Michael refused to have the glass let down; he had now suddenly donned the character of cicerone, and pointed out and lucidly commented on the sights of London, as they drove.

"My dear fellow," he said, "you don't seem to know anything of your native city. Suppose we visited the Tower? No? Well, perhaps it's a trifle out of our way. But anyway — Here, Cabby, drive round by Trafalgar Square!" And on that historic battle-field he insisted on drawing up, while he criticised the statues and gave the artist many curious details (quite new to history) of the lives of the celebrated men they represented.

It would be difficult to express what Pitman suffered in the cab: cold, wet, terror in the capital degree, a grounded distrust of the commander under whom he served, a sense of impudency in the matter of the low-necked shirt, a bitter sense of the decline and fall involved in the deprivation of his beard, all these were among the ingredients of the bowl. To reach the restaurant, for which they were deviously steering, was the first relief. To hear Michael bespeak a private room was a second and a still greater. Nor, as they mounted the stair under the guidance of an unintelligible alien, did he fail to note with gratitude the fewness of the persons present, or the still more cheering fact that the greater part of these were exiles from the land of France. It was thus a blessed thought that none of them would be connected with the Seminary; for even the French professor, though admittedly a papist, he could scarce imagine frequenting so rakish an establishment.

The alien introduced them into a small, bare room with a single table, a sofa, and a dwarfish fire; and Michael called promptly for more coals and a couple of brandies and sodas.

"Oh, no," said Pitman, "surely not—no more to drink."

"I don't know what you would be at," said Michael, plaintively. "It's positively necessary to do something; and one shouldn't smoke before meals—I thought that was understood. You seem to have no idea of hygiene." And he compared his watch with the clock upon the chimney-piece.

Pitman fell into bitter musing; here he was, ridiculously shorn, absurdly disguised, in the company of a drunken man in spectacles, and waiting for a champagne luncheon in a restaurant painfully foreign. What would his principals think, if they could see him? What, if they knew his tragic and deceitful errand?

From these reflections he was aroused by the entrance of the alien with the brandies and sodas. Michael took one and bade the waiter pass the other to his friend.

Pitman waved it from him with his hand. "Don't let me lose all self-respect," he said.

"Anything to oblige a friend," returned Michael. "But I'm not going to drink alone. Here," he added to the waiter, "you take it." And then, touching glasses, "The health of Mr. Gideon Forsyth," said he.

"Meestare Gidden Borsye," replied the waiter, and he tossed off the liquor in four gulps.

"Have another?" said Michael, with undisguised interest. "I never saw a man drink faster. It restores one's confidence in the human race."

But the waiter excused himself politely, and assisted by someone from without, began to bring in lunch.

Michael made an excellent meal, which he washed down with a bottle of Heidsieck's dry monopole. As for the artist, he was far too uneasy to eat, and his companion flatly refused to let him share in the champagne unless he did.

"One of us must stay sober," remarked the lawyer, "and I won't give you champagne on the strength of a leg of grouse. I have to be cautious," he added, confidentially. "One drunken man, excellent business—two drunken men, all my eye."

On the production of coffee and departure of the waiter, Michael might have been observed to make portentous efforts after gravity of mien. He looked his friend in the face (one eye perhaps a trifle off), and addressed him thickly but severely.

"Enough of this fooling," was his not inappropriate exordium. "To business. Mark me closely. I am an Australian. My name is John Dickson, though you mightn't think it from my unassuming appearance. You will be relieved to hear that I am rich, sir, very rich. You can't go into this sort of thing too thoroughly, Pitman; the whole secret is preparation, and I get up my biography from the beginning, and I could tell it you now, only I have forgotten it."

"Perhaps I'm stupid——" began Pitman.

"That's it!" cried Michael. "Very stupid; but rich too—richer than I am. I thought you would enjoy it, Pitman, so I've arranged that you were to be literally wallowing in wealth. But then, on the other hand, you're only an American, and a maker of india-rubber overshoes at that. And the worst of it is—why should I conceal it from you—the worst of it is that you're called Ezra Thomas. Now," said Michael, with a really appalling seriousness of manner, "tell me who we are."

The unfortunate little man was cross-examined till he knew these facts by heart.

"There!" cried the lawyer. "Our plans are laid. Thoroughly consistent—that's the great thing."

"But I don't understand," objected Pitman.

"Oh, you'll understand right enough when it comes to the point," said Michael, rising.

"There doesn't seem any story to it," said the artist.

"We can invent one as we go along," returned the lawyer.

"But I can't invent," protested Pitman. "I never could invent in all my life."

"You'll find you have to, my boy," was Michael's easy comment, and he began calling for the waiter, with whom he at once resumed a sparkling conversation.

It was a down-cast little man that followed him. "Of course he is very clever, but can I trust him in such a state?" he asked himself. And when they were once more in a hansom, he took heart of grace.

"Don't you think," he faltered, "it would be wiser, considering all things, to put this business off?"

"Put off till to-morrow what can be done to-day?" cried Michael, with indignation. "Never heard of such a thing! Cheer up, it's all right, go in and win—there's a lion-hearted Pitman!"

At Cannon Street, they inquired for Mr. Brown's piano, which had duly arrived, drove thence to a neighbouring mews, where they contracted for a cart, and while that was being got ready, took shelter in the harness-room beside the stove. Here the lawyer presently toppled against the wall and fell into a gentle slumber; so that Pitman found himself launched on his own resources in the midst of several staring loafers, such as love to spend unprofitable days about a stable.

"Rough day, sir," observed one. "Do you go far?"

"Yes, it's a—rather a rough day," said the artist; and then, feeling that he must change the conversation, "my friend is an Australian, he is very impulsive," he added.

"An Australian?" said another. "I've a brother myself in Melbourne. Does your friend come from that way at all?"

"No, not exactly," replied the artist, whose ideas of the geography of New Holland were a little scattered. "He lives immensely far inland, and is very rich."

The loafers gazed with great respect upon the slumbering colonist.

"Well," remarked the second speaker, "it's a mighty big place, is Australia. Do you come from there away too?"

"No, I do not," said Pitman. "I do not, and I don't want to," he added, irritably. And then feeling some diversion needful, he fell upon Michael and shook him up.

"Hullo," said the lawyer, "what's wrong?"

"The cart is nearly ready," said Pitman, sternly. "I will not allow you to sleep."

"All right—no offence, old man," replied Michael, yawning. "A little sleep never did anybody any harm; I feel comparatively sober now. But what's all the hurry?" he added, looking round him glassily. "I don't see the cart, and I've forgotten where we left the piano."

What more the lawyer might have said, in the confidence of the moment, is with Pitman a matter of tremulous conjecture to this day; but by the most blessed circumstance, the cart was then announced, and Michael must bend the forces of his mind to the more difficult task of rising.

"Of course, you'll drive," he remarked to his companion, as he clambered on the vehicle.

"I drive!" cried Pitman. "I never did such a thing in my life. I cannot drive."

"Very well," responded Michael, with entire composure, "neither can I see. But just as you like. Anything to oblige a friend."

A glimpse of the ostler's darkening countenance decided Pitman. "All right," he said, desperately, "you drive. I'll tell you where to go."

On Michael in the character of charioteer (since this is not intended to be a novel of adventure) it would be superfluous to dwell at length. Pitman, as he sat holding on and gasping counsels, sole witness of this singular feat, knew not whether most to admire the driver's valour or his undeserved good fortune. But the latter at least prevailed, the cart reached Cannon Street without disaster; and Mr. Brown's piano was speedily and cleverly got on board.

"Well, sir," said the leading porter, smiling as he mentally reckoned up a handful of loose silver, "that's a mortal heavy piano."

"It's the richness of the tone," returned Michael, as he drove away.

It was but a little distance in the rain, which now fell thick and quiet, to the neighbourhood of Mr. Gideon Forsyth's chambers in the Temple. There, in a deserted by-street, Michael drew up the horses and gave them in charge to a blighted shoe-black; and the pair descending from the cart, whereon they had figured so incongruously, set forth on foot for the decisive scene of their adventure. For the first time, Michael displayed a shadow of uneasiness.

"Are my whiskers right?" he asked. "It would be the devil and all if I was spotted."

"They are perfectly in their place," returned Pitman, with scant attention. "But is my disguise equally effective? There is nothing more likely than that I should meet some of my patrons."

"Oh, nobody could tell you without your beard," said Michael. "All you have to do is to remember to speak slow; you speak through your nose already."

"I only hope the young man won't be at home," sighed Pitman.

"And I only hope he'll be alone," returned the lawyer. "It will save a precious sight of manœuvring."

And sure enough, when they had knocked at the door, Gideon admitted them in person to a room, warmed by a moderate fire, framed nearly to the roof in works connected with the bench of British Themis, and offering, except in one particular, eloquent testimony to the legal zeal of the proprietor. The one particular was the chimney-piece, which displayed a varied assortment of pipes, tobacco, cigar-boxes, and yellow-backed French novels.

"Mr. Forsyth, I believe?" It was Michael who thus opened the engagement. "We have come to trouble you with a piece of business. I fear it's scarcely professional——"

"I am afraid I ought to be instructed through a solicitor," replied Gideon.

"Well, well, you shall name your own, and the whole affair can be put on a more regular footing to-morrow," replied Michael, taking a chair and motioning Pitman to do the same. "But you see we didn't know any solicitors; we did happen to know of you, and time presses."

"May I inquire, gentlemen," asked Gideon, "to whom it was I am indebted for a recommendation?"

"You may inquire," returned the lawyer, with a foolish laugh; "but I was invited not to tell you — till the thing was done."

"My uncle, no doubt," was the barrister's conclusion.

"My name is John Dickson," continued Michael; "a pretty well-known name in Ballarat; and my friend here is Mr. Ezra Thomas, of the United States of America, a wealthy manufacturer of India-rubber overshoes."

"Stop one moment till I make a note of that," said Gideon; anyone might have supposed he was an old practitioner.

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind my smoking a cigar?" asked Michael. He had pulled himself together for the entrance; now again there began to settle on his mind clouds of irresponsible humour and incipient slumber; and he hoped (as so many have hoped in the like case) that a cigar would clear him.

"Oh, certainly," cried Gideon, blandly. "Try one of mine; I can confidently recommend them." And he handed the box to his client.

"In case I don't make myself perfectly clear," observed the Australian, "it's perhaps best to tell you candidly that I've been lunching. It's a thing that may happen to anyone."

"Oh, certainly," replied the affable barrister. "But please be under no sense of hurry. I can give you," he added, thoughtfully consulting his watch — "yes, I can give you the whole afternoon."

"The business that brings me here," resumed the Australian with gusto, "is devilish delicate, I can tell you. My friend Mr. Thomas, being an American of

Portuguese extraction, unacquainted with our habits, and a wealthy manufacturer of Broadwood pianos——"

"Broadwood pianos?" cried Gideon, with some surprise. "Dear me, do I understand Mr. Thomas to be a member of the firm?"

"Oh, pirated Broadwoods," returned Michael. "My friend's the American Broadwood."

"But I understood you to say," objected Gideon, "I certainly have it so in my notes — that your friend was a manufacturer of India-rubber overshoes."

"I know it's confusing at first," said the Australian, with a beaming smile. "But he — in short, he combines the two professions. And many others besides — many, many, many others," repeated Mr. Dickson, with drunken solemnity. "Mr. Thomas' cotton-mills are one of the sights of Tallahassee; Mr. Thomas' tobacco-mills are the pride of Richmond, Va.; in short, he's one of my oldest friends, Mr. Forsyth, and I lay his case before you with emotion."

The barrister looked at Mr. Thomas and was agreeably prepossessed by his open although nervous countenance, and the simplicity and timidity of his manner. "What a people are these Americans!" he thought. "Look at this nervous, weedy, simple little bird in a low-necked shirt, and think of him wielding and directing interests so extended and seemingly incongruous! But had we not better," he observed aloud, "had we not perhaps better approach the facts?"

"Man of business, I perceive, sir!" said the Australian. "Let's approach the facts. It's a breach of promise case."

The unhappy artist was so unprepared for this view of his position that he could scarce suppress a cry.

"Dear me," said Gideon, "they are apt to be very troublesome. Tell me everything about it," he added, kindly; "if you require my assistance, conceal nothing."

"*You* tell him," said Michael, feeling, apparently, that he had done his share. "My friend will tell you all about it," he added to Gideon, with a yawn. "Excuse my closing my eyes a moment; I've been sitting up with a sick friend."

Pitman gazed blankly about the room; rage and despair seethed in his innocent spirit; thoughts of flight, thoughts even of suicide, came and went before him; and still the barrister patiently waited, and still the artist groped in vain for any form of words, however insignificant.

"It's a breach of promise case," he said at last, in a low voice. "I—I am threatened with a breach of promise case." Here, in desperate quest of inspiration, he made a clutch at his beard; his fingers closed upon the unfamiliar smoothness of a shaven chin; and with that, hope and courage (if such expressions could ever have been appropriate in the case of Pitman) conjointly fled. He shook Michael roughly. "Wake up!" he cried, with genuine irritation in his tones. "I cannot do it, and you know I can't."

"You must excuse my friend," said Michael; "he's no hand as a narrator of stirring incident. The case is simple," he went on. "My friend is a man of very strong passions, and accustomed to a simple, patriarchal style of life. You see the thing from here: unfortunate visit to Europe, followed by unfortunate acquaintance with sham foreign count, who has a lovely daughter. Mr.

Thomas was quite carried away; he proposed, he was accepted, and he wrote — wrote in a style which I am sure he must regret to-day. If these letters are produced in court, sir, Mr. Thomas's character is gone."

"Am I to understand —" began Gideon.

"My dear sir," said the Australian, emphatically, "it isn't possible to understand unless you saw them."

"That is a painful circumstance," said Gideon; he glanced pityingly in the direction of the culprit, and observing on his countenance every mark of confusion, pityingly withdrew his eyes.

"And that would be nothing," continued Mr. Dickson, sternly, "but I wish — I wish from my heart, sir, I could say that Mr. Thomas' hands were clean. He has no excuse; for he was engaged at the time — and is still engaged — to the belle of Constantinople, Ga. My friend's conduct was unworthy of the brutes that perish."

"Ga?" repeated Gideon, inquiringly.

"A contraction in current use," said Michael. "Ga for Georgia, in the same way as Co for Company."

"I was aware it was sometimes so written," returned the barrister, "but not that it was so pronounced."

"Fact, I assure you," said Michael. "You now see for yourself, sir, that if this unhappy person is to be saved, some devilish sharp practice will be needed. There's money, and no desire to spare it. Mr. Thomas could write a cheque to-morrow for a hundred thousand. And, Mr. Forsyth, there's better than money. The foreign count — Count Tarnow, he calls himself — was formerly a tobacconist in Bayswater, and passed under the humble but expressive name of Schmidt; his daughter — if she is his daughter — there's another point — make a note of that, Mr. Forsyth — his daughter at that time actually served in the shop — and she now proposes to marry a man of the eminence of Mr. Thomas! Now do you see our game?' We know they contemplate a move; and we wish to forestall 'em. Down you go to Hampton Court, where they live, and threaten, or bribe, or both, until you get the letters; if you can't, God help us, we must go to court and Thomas must be exposed. I'll be done with him for one," added the unchivalrous friend.

"There seem some elements of success," said Gideon. "Was Schmidt at all known to the police?"

"We hope so," said Michael. "We have every ground to think so. Mark the neighbourhood — Bayswater! doesn't Bayswater occur to you as very suggestive?"

For perhaps the sixth time during this remarkable interview, Gideon wondered if he were not becoming light-headed. "I suppose it's just because he has been lunching," he thought; and then added aloud, "to what figure may I go?"

"Perhaps five thousand would be enough for to-day," said Michael. "And now, sir, do not let me detain you any longer; the afternoon wears on; there are plenty of trains to Hampton Court; and I needn't try to describe to you the impatience of my friend. Here is a five pound note for current expenses; and here is the address." And Michael began to write, paused, tore up the paper, and put the pieces in his pocket. "I will dictate," he said, "my writing is so uncertain."

Gideon took down the address, "Count Tarnow, Kurnaul Villa, Hampton Court." Then he wrote something else on a sheet of paper. "You said you had not chosen a solicitor," he said. "For a case of this sort, here is the best man in London." And he handed the paper to Michael.

"God bless me!" ejaculated Michael, as he read his own address.

"Oh, I dare say you have seen his name connected with some rather painful cases," said Gideon. "But he is himself a perfectly honest man and his capacity is recognised. And now, gentlemen, it only remains for me to ask where I shall communicate with you."

"The Langham, of course," returned Michael. "Till to-night."

"Till to-night," replied Gideon, smiling. "I suppose I may knock you up at a late hour?"

"Any hour, any hour," cried the vanishing solicitor.

"Now there's a young fellow with a head upon his shoulders," he said to Pitman, as soon as they were in the street.

Pitman was indistinctly heard to murmur, "Perfect fool."

"Not a bit of him," returned Michael. "He knows who's the best solicitor in London, and it's not every man can say the same. But, I say, didn't I pitch it in hot?"

Pitman returned no answer.

"Hullo!" said the lawyer, pausing, "what's wrong with the long-suffering Pitman?"

"You had no right to speak of me as you did," the artist broke out; "your language was perfectly unjustifiable; you have wounded me deeply."

"I never said a word about you," replied Michael.

"I spoke of Ezra Thomas; and do please remember that there's no such party."

"It's just as hard to bear," said the artist.

But by this time they had reached the corner of the by-street; and there was the faithful shoeblack, standing by the horses' heads with a splendid assumption of dignity; and there was the piano, pricking forlorn upon the cart, while the rain beat upon its unprotected sides and trickled down its elegantly varnished legs.

The shoeblack was again put in requisition to bring five or six strong fellows from the neighbouring public-house; and the last battle of the campaign opened. It is probable that Mr. Gideon Forsyth had not yet taken his seat in the train for Hampton Court, before Michael opened the door of the chambers, and the grunting porters deposited the Broadwood grand in the middle of the floor.

"And now," said the lawyer, after he had sent the men about their business, "one more precaution. We must leave him the key of the piano, and we must contrive that he shall find it. Let me see." And he built a square tower of cigars upon the top of the instrument, and dropped the key into the middle.

"Poor young man," said the artist, as they descended the stairs.

"He is in a devil of a position," assented Michael, dryly. "It'll brace him up."

"And that reminds me," observed the excellent Pitman, "that I fear I displayed a most ungrateful temper. I had no right, I see, to resent expressions, wounding as they were, which were in no sense directed."

"That's all right," cried Michael, getting on the cart.

"Not a word more, Pitman. Very proper feeling on your part; no man of self-respect can stand by and hear his *alias* insulted."

The rain had now ceased, Michael was fairly sober, the body had been disposed of, and the friends were reconciled. The return to the mews was therefore (in comparison with previous stages of the day's adventures) quite a holiday outing; and when they had returned the cart and walked forth again from the stable-yard, unchallenged and even unsuspected, Pitman drew a deep breath of joy.

"And now," he said, "we can go home."

"Pitman," said the lawyer, stopping short, "your recklessness fills me with concern. What! we have been wet through the greater part of the day, and you propose, in cold blood, to go home! No, sir—hot Scotch."

And taking his friend's arm he led him sternly toward the nearest public-house. Nor was Pitman (I regret to say) wholly unwilling. Now that peace was restored and the body gone, a certain innocent skittishness began to appear in the manners of the artist; and when he touched his steaming glass to Michael's, he giggled aloud like a venturesome school-girl at a picnic.

CHAPTER IX

GLORIOUS CONCLUSION OF MICHAEL FINSBURY'S HOLIDAY

I KNOW Michael Finsbury personally; my business — I know the awkwardness of having such a man for a lawyer — still it's an old story now, and there is such a thing as gratitude, and, in short, my legal business, although now (I am thankful to say) of quite a placid character, remains entirely in Michael's hands. But the trouble is I have no natural talent for addresses; I learn one for every man — that is friendship's offering; and the friend who subsequently changes his residence is dead to me, memory refusing to pursue him. Thus it comes about that, as I always write to Michael at his office, I cannot swear to his number in the King's Road. Of course (like my neighbours), I have been to dinner there. Of late years, since his accession to wealth, neglect of business, and election to the club, these little festivals have become common. He picks up a few fellows in the smoking-room — all men of Attic wit — myself, for instance, if he has the luck to find me disengaged; a string of hansoms may be observed (by her Majesty) bowling gaily through St. James's Park; and in a quarter of an hour the party surrounds one of the best appointed boards in London.

But at the time of which we write the house in the

King's Road (let us still continue to call it No. 233) was kept very quiet; when Michael entertained guests it was at the halls of Nichol or Verrey that he would convene them, and the door of his private residence remained closed against his friends. The upper storey, which was sunny, was set apart for his father; the drawing-room was never opened; the dining-room was the scene of Michael's life. It is in this pleasant apartment, sheltered from the curiosity of King's Road by wire blinds, and entirely surrounded by the lawyer's unrivalled library of poetry and criminal trials, that we find him sitting down to his dinner after his holiday with Pitman. A spare old lady, with very bright eyes and a mouth humorously compressed, waited upon the lawyer's needs; in every line of her countenance she betrayed the fact that she was an old retainer; in every word that fell from her lips she flaunted the glorious circumstance of a Scottish origin; and the fear with which this powerful combination fills the boldest was obviously no stranger to the bosom of our friend. The hot Scotch having somewhat warmed up the embers of the Heidsieck, it was touching to observe the master's eagerness to pull himself together under the servant's eye; and when he remarked: "I think, Teena, I'll take a brandy and soda," he spoke like a man doubtful of his elocution, and not half certain of obedience.

"No such a thing, Mr. Michael," was the prompt return. "Clar't and water."

"Well, well, Teena, I daresay you know best," said the master. "Very fatiguing day at the office, though."

"What?" said the retainer, "ye never were near the office!"

"Oh, yes, I was though; I was repeatedly along Fleet Street," returned Michael.

"Pretty pliskies ye've been at this day!" cried the old lady, with humorous alacrity; and then: "Take care — don't break my crystal!" she cried, as the lawyer came within an ace of knocking the glasses off the table.

"And how is he keeping?" asked Michael.

"Oh, just the same, Mr. Michael, just the way he'll be till the end, worthy man!" was the reply. "But ye'll not be the first that's asked me that the day."

"No?" said the lawyer. "Who else?"

"Ay, that's a joke, too," said Teena, grimly. "A friend of yours: Mr. Morris."

"Morris! What was the little beggar doing here?" inquired Michael.

"Wantin'? To see him," replied the housekeeper, completing her meaning by a movement of the thumb toward the upper story. "That's by his way of it; but I've an idee of my own. He tried to bribe me, Mr. Michael. Bribe — me!" she repeated, with inimitable scorn. "That's no kind of a young gentleman."

"Did he so?" said Michael. "I bet he didn't offer much."

"No more he did," replied Teena; nor could any subsequent questioning elicit from her the sum with which the thrifty leather merchant had attempted to corrupt her. "But I sent him about his business," she said, gallantly. "He'll not come here again in a hurry."

"He mustn't see my father, you know; mind that!" said Michael. "I'm not going to have any public exhibition to a little beast like him."

"No fear of me lettin' him," replied the trusty one. "But the joke is this, Mr. Michael — see, ye're upsettin' the sauce, that's a clean table-cloth — the best of the joke is that he thinks your father's dead and you're keepin' it dark."

Michael whistled. "Set a thief to catch a thief," said he.

"Exac'ly what I told him!" cried the delighted dame.

"I'll make him dance for that," said Michael.

"Couldn't ye get the law of him some way?" suggested Teena, truculently.

"No, I don't think I could, and I'm quite sure I don't want to," replied Michael. "But I say, Teena, I really don't believe this claret's wholesome; it's not a sound, reliable wine. Give us a brandy and soda, there's a good soul." Teena's face became like adamant. "Well, then," said the lawyer, fretfully, "I won't eat any more dinner."

"Ye can please yourself about that, Mr. Michael," said Teena, and began composedly to take away.

"I do wish Teena wasn't a faithful servant!" sighed the lawyer, as he issued into King's Road.

The rain had ceased; the wind still blew, but only with a pleasant freshness; the town, in the clear darkness of the night, glittered with street-lamps and shone with glancing rain-pools. "Come, this is better," thought the lawyer to himself, and he walked on eastward, lending a pleased ear to the wheels and the million footfalls of the city.

Near the end of the King's Road he remembered his brandy and soda, and entered a flaunting public house. A good many persons were present, a waterman from a cab-stand, half a dozen of the chronically unemployed, a gentleman (in one corner) trying to sell æsthetic photographs out of a leather case to another and very youthful gentleman with a yellow goatee, and a pair of lovers debating some fine shade, in the other. But the centrepiece and great attraction was a little old man, in a black, ready-made surtout, which was obviously a recent purchase. On the marble table in front of him, beside a sandwich and a glass of beer, there lay a battered forage cap. His hand fluttered abroad with oratorical gestures; his voice, naturally shrill, was plainly tuned to the pitch of the lecture-room; and by arts, comparable to those of the Ancient Mariner, he was now holding spellbound the barmaid, the waterman, and four of the unemployed.

"I have examined all the theatres in London," he was saying; "and pacing the principal entrances, I have ascertained them to be ridiculously disproportionate to the requirements of their audiences. The doors opened the wrong way — I forget at this moment which it is, but have a note of it at home; they were frequently locked during the performance, and when the auditorium was literally thronged with English people. You have probably not had my opportunities of comparing distant lands; but I can assure you this has been long ago recognised as a mark of aristocratic government. Do you suppose, in a country really self-governed, such abuses could exist? Your own intelligence, however uncultivated, tells you they could not. Take Austria, a country even possibly more enslaved than England. I have myself conversed with one of the survivors of the Ring Theatre, and though his colloquial German was not very good, I succeeded in gathering a pretty clear idea of his opinion of the case. But what will perhaps interest you still more, here is a cutting on the subject from a Vienna newspaper, which I will now read to you, translating as I go. You can see for yourselves; it is printed in the German character." And he held the cutting out for verification, much as a conjurer passes a trick orange along the front bench.

"Hullo, old gentleman! is this you?" said Michael, laying his hand upon the orator's shoulder.

The figure turned with a convulsion of alarm, and showed the countenance of Mr. Joseph Finsbury.

"You, Michael!" he cried. "There's no one with you, is there?"

"No," replied Michael, ordering a brandy and soda, "there's nobody with me; whom do you expect?"

"I thought of Morris or John," said the old gentleman, evidently greatly relieved.

"What the devil would I be doing with Morris or John?" cried the nephew.

"There is something in that," returned Joseph. "And I believe I can trust you. I believe you will stand by me."

"I hardly know what you mean," said the lawyer, "but if you are in need of money I am flush."

"It's not that, my dear boy," said the uncle, shaking him by the hand. "I'll tell you all about it afterward."

"All right," responded the nephew. "I stand treat, Uncle Joseph; what will you have?"

"In that case," replied the old gentleman, "I'll take another sandwich. I dare say I surprise you," he went on, "with my presence in a public-house; but the fact is I act on a sound but little known principle of my own ——"

"Oh, it's better known than you suppose," said Michael, sipping his brandy and soda. "I always act on it myself when I want a drink."

The old gentleman, who was anxious to propitiate Michael, laughed a cheerless laugh. "You have such a flow of spirits," said he, "I am sure I often find it quite amusing. But regarding this principle of which I was about to speak. It is that of accommodating one's self to the manners of any land (however humble) in which our lot may be cast. Now, in France, for instance, everyone goes to a café for his meals; in America to what is called a 'two-bit house'; in England the people resort to such an institution as the present for refreshment. With sandwiches, tea, and an occasional glass of bitter beer, a man can live luxuriously in London for fourteen pounds twelve shillings per annum."

"Yes, I know," returned Michael, "but that's not including clothes, washing, or boots. The whole thing, with cigars and occasional sprees, costs me over seven hundred a year."

But this was Michael's last interruption. He listened in good-humoured silence to the remainder of his uncle's lecture, which speedily branched to political reform, thence to the theory of the weather-glass, with an illustrative account of a bora in the Adriatic; thence again to the best manner of teaching arithmetic to the deaf-and-dumb; and with that, the sandwich being then no more, *explicuit valde feliciter.* A moment later the pair issued forth on the King's Road.

"Michael," said his uncle, "the reason that I am here is because I cannot endure those nephews of mine. I find them intolerable."

"I dare say you do," assented Michael, "I never could stand them for a moment."

"They wouldn't let me speak," continued the old gentleman, bitterly; "I never was allowed to get a word in edgewise; I was shut up at once with some impertinent remark. They kept me on short allowance of pencils, when I wished to make notes of the most absorbing interest; the daily newspaper was guarded from me like a young baby from a gorilla. Now, you know me, Michael. I live for my calculations; I live for my manifold and ever-changing views of life; pens and paper and the productions of the popular press are to me as important as food and drink; and my life was growing quite intolerable when, in the confusion of that fortunate railway accident at Browndean, I made my escape. They must think me dead, and are trying to deceive the world for the chance of the tontine."

"By the way, how do you stand for money?" asked Michael, kindly.

"Pecuniarily speaking, I am rich," returned the old man, with cheerfulness. "I am living at present at the rate of one hundred a year, with unlimited pens and paper; the British Museum at which to get books; and all the newspapers I choose to read. But it's extraordinary how little a man of intellectual interest requires to bother with books in a progressive age. The newspapers supply all the conclusions."

"I'll tell you what," said Michael, "come and stay with me."

"Michael," said the old gentleman, "it's very kind of you, but you scarcely understand what a peculiar position I occupy. There are some little financial complications; as a guardian my efforts were not altogether blessed; and not to put too fine a point upon the matter, I am absolutely in the power of that vile fellow, Morris."

"You should be disguised," cried Michael, eagerly. "I will lend you a pair of window-glass spectacles, and some red side-whiskers."

"I had already canvassed that idea," replied the old gentleman, "but feared to awaken remark in my unpretentious lodgings. The aristocracy, I am well aware——"

"But see here," interrupted Michael, "how do you come to have any money at all? Don't make a stranger of me, Uncle Joseph; I know all about the trust, and the hash you made of it, and the assignment you were forced to make to Morris."

Joseph narrated his dealings with the bank.

"Oh, but I say, this won't do," cried the lawyer. "You've put your foot in it. You had no right to do what you did."

"The whole thing is mine, Michael," protested the old gentleman. "I founded and nursed that business on principles entirely of my own."

"That's all very fine," said the lawyer; "but you made an assignment, you were forced to make it, too; even then your position was extremely shaky; but now, my dear sir, it means the dock."

"It isn't possible," cried Joseph; "the law cannot be so unjust as that?"

"And the cream of the thing," interrupted Michael, with a sudden shout of laughter, "the cream of the thing is this, that of course you've downed the leather business! I must say, Uncle Joseph, you have strange ideas of law, but I like your taste in humour."

"I see nothing to laugh at," observed Mr. Finsbury, tartly.

"And talking of that, has Morris any power to sign for the firm?" asked Michael.

"No one but myself," replied Joseph.

"Poor devil of a Morris. Oh, poor devil of a Morris!" cried the lawyer in delight. "And his keeping up the farce that you're at home! Oh, Morris, the Lord has delivered you into my hands! Let me see, Uncle Joseph, what do you suppose the leather business worth?"

"It *was* worth a hundred thousand," said Joseph, bitterly, "when it was in my hands. But then there came a Scotchman — it is supposed he had a certain talent — it was entirely directed to book-keeping — no accountant in London could understand a word of any of his books; and then there was Morris, who is perfectly incompetent. And now it is worth very little. Morris tried to sell it last year; and Pogram & Jarris offered only four thousand."

"I shall turn my attention to leather," said Michael with decision.

"You?" asked Joseph. "I advise you not. There is nothing in the whole field of commerce more surprising than the fluctuations of the leather market. Its sensitiveness may be described as morbid."

"And now, Uncle Joseph, what have you done with all that money?" asked the lawyer.

"Paid it into a bank and drew twenty pounds," answered Mr. Finsbury promptly. "Why?"

"Very well," said Michael. "To-morrow I shall send down a clerk with a cheque for a hundred, and he'll draw out the original sum and return it to the Anglo-Patagonian, with some sort of explanation which I will try to invent for you. That will clear your feet, and as Morris can't touch a penny of it without forgery, it will do no harm to my little scheme."

"But what am I to do?" asked Joseph, "I cannot live upon nothing."

"Don't you hear?" returned Michael. "I send you a cheque for a hundred; which leaves you eighty to go along upon; and when that's done, apply to me again."

"I would rather not be beholden to your bounty all the same," said Joseph, biting at his white moustache. "I would rather live on my own money, since I have it."

Michael grasped his arm. "Will nothing make you believe," he cried, "that I am trying to save you from Dartmoor?"

His earnestness staggered the old man. "I must turn my attention to law," he said; "it will be a new field; for though of course I understand its general principles, I have never really applied my mind to the details, and this view of yours, for example, comes on me entirely by surprise. But you may be right, and of course at my time of life — for I am no longer young — any really long term of imprisonment would be highly prejudicial. But, my dear nephew, I have no claim on you; you have no call to support me."

"That's all right," said Michael; "I'll probably get it out of the leather business."

And having taken down the old gentleman's address, Michael left him at the corner of a street.

"What a wonderful old muddler!" he reflected, "and what a singular thing is life! I seem to be condemned to be the instrument of Providence. Let me see; what have I done to-day? Disposed of a dead body, saved Pitman, saved my Uncle Joseph, brightened up Forsyth, and drunk a devil of a lot of most indifferent liquor. Let's top off with a visit to my cousins, and be the instrument of Providence in earnest. To-morrow I can turn my attention to leather; to-night, I'll just make it lively for 'em in a friendly spirit."

About a quarter of an hour later, as the clocks were striking eleven, the instrument of Providence descended from a hansom, and bidding the driver wait, rapped at the door of No. 16 John Street.

It was promptly opened by Morris.

"Oh, it's you, Michael," he said, carefully blocking up the narrow opening: "it's very late."

Michael without a word reached forth, grasped Morris warmly by the hand, and gave it so extreme a squeeze that the sullen householder fell back. Profiting by this movement, the lawyer obtained a footing in the lobby and marched into the dining-room, with Morris at his heels.

"Where's my Uncle Joseph?" demanded Michael, sitting down in the most comfortable chair.

"He's not been very well lately," replied Morris; "he's staying at Browndean; John is nursing him; and I am alone, as you see."

Michael smiled to himself. "I want to see him on particular business," he said.

"You can't expect to see my uncle, when you won't let me see your father," returned Morris.

"Fiddlestick," said Michael. "My father is my father; but Joseph is just as much my uncle as he's yours; and you have no right to sequestrate his person."

"I do no such thing," said Morris, doggedly. "He is not well; he is dangerously ill and nobody can see him."

"I'll tell you what, then," said Michael. "I'll make a clean breast of it. I have come down like the opossum, Morris; I have come to compromise."

Poor Morris turned as pale as death, and then a flush of wrath against the injustice of man's destiny dyed his very temples. "What do you mean?" he cried. "I don't believe a word of it!" And when Michael had assured him of his seriousness, "Well, then," he cried, with another deep flush, "I won't; so you can put that in your pipe and smoke it."

"Oho!" said Michael, queerly. "You say your uncle is dangerously ill, and you won't compromise? There's something very fishy about that."

"What do you mean?" cried Morris, hoarsely.

"I only say it's fishy," returned Michael, "that is, pertaining to the finny tribe."

"Do you mean to insinuate anything?" cried Morris, stormily, trying the high hand.

"Insinuate?" repeated Michael. "Oh, don't let's begin to use awkward expressions! Let us drown our differences in a bottle, like two affable kinsmen. *The Two Affable Kinsmen*, sometimes attributed to Shakespeare," he added.

Morris' mind was labouring like a mill. "Does he suspect? or is this chance and stuff? Should I soap, or should I bully? Soap," he concluded. "It gains time. Well," said he aloud, and with rather a painful affectation of heartiness, "it's long since we have had an evening together, Michael; and though my habits (as you know) are very temperate, I may as well make an exception. Excuse me one moment, till I fetch a bottle of whisky from the cellar."

"No whisky for me," said Michael; "a little of the old still champagne or nothing."

For a moment Morris stood irresolute, for the wine was very valuable; the next he had quitted the room without a word. His quick mind had perceived his advantage; in thus dunning him for the cream of the cellar, Michael was playing into his hand. "One bottle?" he thought. "By George, I'll give him two! this is no moment for economy; and once the beast is drunk, it's strange if I don't wring his secret out of him."

With two bottles, accordingly, he returned. Glasses were produced, and Morris filled them with hospitable grace.

"I drink to you, cousin!" he cried, gayly. "Don't spare the wine-cup in my house."

Michael drank his glass deliberately, standing at the table; filled it again, and returned to his chair, carrying the bottle along with him.

"The spoils of war!" he said, apologetically. "The weakest goes to the wall. Science, Morris, science." Morris could think of no reply, and for an appreciable interval silence reigned. But two glasses of the still champagne produced a rapid change in Michael.

"There's a want of vivacity about you, Morris," he observed. "You may be deep; but I'll be hanged if you're vivacious!"

"What makes you think me deep?" asked Morris, with an air of pleased simplicity.

"Because you won't compromise," said the lawyer. "You're deep dog, Morris, very deep dog, not t' compromise — remarkable deep dog. And a very good glass of wine; it's the only respectable feature in the Finsbury family, this wine; rarer thing than a title — much rarer. Now, a man with glass wine like this in cellar, I wonder why won't compromise?"

"Well, *you* wouldn' compromise before, you know," said the smiling Morris. "Turn about is fair play."

"I wonder why *I* wouldn' compromise? I wonder why *you* wouldn'?" inquired Michael. "I wonder why we each think the other wouldn'? 'S quite a remarrable — remarkable problem," he added, triumphing over oral obstacles, not without obvious pride. "Wonder what we each think — don't you?"

"What do you suppose to have been my reason?" asked Morris, adroitly.

Michael looked at him and winked. "Tha's cool," said he. "Next thing, you'll ask me to help you out of the muddle. I know I'm emissary of Providence, but not that kind! You get out of it yourself, like Æsop and the other fellow. Must be dreadful muddle for young orphan o' forty; leather business and all!"

"I am sure I don't know what you mean," said Morris.

"Not sure I know myself," said Michael. "This is exc'lent vintage, sir — exc'lent vintage. Nothing against the tipple. Only thing; here's a valuable uncle disappeared. Now, what I want to know: where's valuable uncle?"

"I have told you: he is at Browndean," answered Morris, furtively wiping his brow, for these repeated hints began to tell upon him cruelly.

"Very easy say Brown—Browndee—no' so easy after all!" cried Michael. "Easy say; anything's easy say, when you can say it. What I don' like's total disappearance of an uncle. Not business-like." And he wagged his head.

"It is all perfectly simple," returned Morris, with laborious calm. "There is no mystery. He stays at Browndean, where he got a shake in the accident."

"Ah!" said Michael, "got devil of a shake?"

"Why do you say that?" cried Morris, sharply.

"Best possible authority. Told me so yourself," said the lawyer. "But if you tell me contrary now, of course I'm bound to believe either the one story or the other. Point is—I've upset this bottle, still champagne's exc'lent thing carpet—point is, is valuable uncle dead—an'—bury?"

Morris sprang from his seat. "What's that you say?" he gasped.

"I say it's exc'lent thing carpet," replied Michael, rising. "Exc'lent thing promote healthy action of the skin. Well, it's all one, anyway. Give my love to Uncle Champagne."

"You're not going away?" said Morris.

"Awf'ly sorry, ole man. Got to sit up sick friend," said the wavering Michael.

"You shall not go till you have explained your hints," returned Morris, fiercely. "What do you mean? What brought you here?"

"No offence, I trust," said the lawyer, turning round as he opened the door; "only doing my duty as shemishery of Providence."

Groping his way to the front-door, he opened it with some difficulty, and descended the steps to the hansom. The tired driver looked up as he approached, and asked where he was to go next.

Michael observed that Morris had followed him to the steps; a brilliant inspiration came to him. "Anything t' give pain," he reflected. . . . "Drive Shcotlan' Yard," he added aloud, holding to the wheel to steady himself; "there's something devilish fishy, cabby, about those cousins. Mush' be cleared up! Drive Shcotlan' Yard."

"You don't mean that, sir," said the man, with the ready sympathy of the lower orders for an intoxicated gentleman. "I had better take you home, sir; you can go to Scotland Yard to-morrow."

"Is it as friend or as perfessional man you advise me not to go Shcotlan' Yard t'night?" inquired Michael. "All righ', never min' Shcotlan' Yard, drive Gaiety bar."

"The Gaiety bar is closed," said the man.

"Then home," said Michael, with the same cheerfulness.

"Where to, sir?"

"I don't remember, I'm sure," said Michael, entering the vehicle, "drive Shcotlan' Yard and ask."

"But you'll have a card," said the man, through the little aperture in the top, "give me your card-case."

"What imagi—imagination in a cabby!" cried the lawyer, producing his card-case, and handing it to the driver.

The man read it by the light of the lamp. "Mr. Michael Finsbury, 233 King's Road, Chelsea. Is that it, sir?"

"Right you are," cried Michael, "drive there if you can see way."

CHAPTER X

GIDEON FORSYTH AND THE BROADWOOD GRAND

THE reader has perhaps read that remarkable work, *Who Put Back the Clock?* by E. H. B., which appeared for several days upon the railway bookstalls and then vanished entirely from the face of the earth. Whether eating Time makes the chief of his diet out of old editions; whether Providence has passed a special enactment on behalf of authors; or whether these last have taken the law into their own hand, bound themselves into a dark conspiracy with a password, which I would die rather than reveal, and night after night sally forth under some vigorous leader, such as Mr. James Payn or Mr. Walter Besant, on their task of secret spoliation — certain it is, at least, that the old editions pass, giving place to new. To the proof, it is believed there are now only three copies extant of *Who Put Back the Clock?* one in the British Museum, successfully concealed by a wrong entry in the catalogue; another in one of the cellars (the cellar where the music accumulates) of the Advocates' Library in Edinburgh; and a third, bound in morocco, in the possession of Gideon Forsyth. To account for the very different fate attending this third exemplar, the readiest theory is to suppose that Gideon admired the tale. How to explain that admiration might appear (to those who have perused the work) more difficult; but the weakness of a parent is extreme, and Gideon (and not his uncle, whose initials he had humorously borrowed) was the author of *Who Put Back the Clock?* He had never acknowledged it, or only to some intimate friends while it was still in proof; after its appearance and alarming failure, the modesty of the novelist had become more pressing, and the secret was now likely to be better kept than that of the authorship of *Waverley.*

A copy of the work (for the date of my tale is already yesterday) still figured in dusty solitude in the bookstall at Waterloo; and Gideon, as he passed with his ticket for Hampton Court, smiled contemptuously at the creature of his thoughts. What an idle ambition was the author's! How far beneath him was the practice of that childish art! With his hand closing on his first brief, he felt himself a man at last; and the muse who presides over the police romance, a lady presumably of French extraction, fled his neighbourhood, and returned to join the dance round the springs of Helicon, among her Grecian sisters.

Robust, practical reflection still cheered the young barrister upon his journey. Again and again he selected the little country house in its islet of great oaks, which he was to make his future home. Like a prudent householder, he projected improvements as he passed; to one he added a stable, to another a tennis court, a third he supplied with a becoming, rustic boathouse.

"How little a while ago," he could not but reflect, 'I was a careless young dog with no thought but to be comfortable! I cared for nothing but boating and detective novels. I would have passed an old-fashioned country house with large kitchen-garden, stabling, boat-house, and spacious offices, without so much as a look, and certainly would have made no inquiry as to the drains. How a man ripens with the years!"

The intelligent reader will perceive the ravages of Miss Hazeltine. Gideon had carried Julia straight to Mr. Bloomfield's house; and that gentleman, having been led to understand she was the victim of oppression, had noisily espoused her cause. He worked himself into a fine breathing heat; in which, to a man of his temperament, action became needful.

"I do not know which is the worse," he cried, "the fraudulent old villain or the unmanly young cub. I will write to the *Pall Mall* and expose them. Nonsense, sir; they must be exposed! It's a public duty. Did you not tell me the fellow was a tory? Oh, the uncle is a radical lecturer, is he? No doubt, the uncle has been grossly wronged. But of course, as you say, that makes a change; it becomes scarce so much a public duty."

And he sought and instantly found a fresh outlet for his alacrity. Miss Hazeltine (he now perceived) must be kept out of the way; his houseboat was lying ready—he had returned but a day or two before from his usual cruise; there was no place like a houseboat for concealment; and that very morning, in the teeth of the easterly gale, Mr. and Mrs. Bloomfield and Miss Julia Hazeltine had started forth on their untimely voyage. Gideon pled in vain to be allowed to join the party. "No, Gid," said his uncle. "You will be watched;

you must keep away from us." Nor had the barrister ventured to contest this strange illusion; for he feared if he rubbed off any of the romance, that Mr. Bloomfield might weary of the whole affair. And his discretion was rewarded; for the Squirradical, laying a heavy hand upon his nephew's shoulder, had added these notable expressions: "I see what you are after, Gid. But if you're going to get the girl, you have to work, sir."

These pleasing sounds had cheered the barrister all day, as he sat reading in chambers; they continued to form the ground-base of his manly musings as he was whirled to Hampton Court; even when he landed at the station, and began to pull himself together for his delicate interview, the voice of Uncle Ned and the eyes of Julia were not forgotten.

But now it began to rain surprises: in all Hampton Court, there was no Kurnaul Villa, no Count Tarnow, and no count. This was strange; but viewed in the light of the incoherency of his instructions, not perhaps inexplicable; Mr. Dickson had been lunching, and he might have made some fatal oversight in the address. What was the thoroughly prompt, manly, and business-like step? thought Gideon; and he answered himself at once: "A telegram, very laconic." Speedily, the wires were flashing the following very important missive: "Dickson, Langham Hotel. Villa and persons both unknown here, suppose erroneous address; follow self next train. Forsyth." And at the Langham Hotel, sure enough, with a brow expressive of despatch and intellectual effort, Gideon descended not long after from a smoking hansom.

I do not suppose that Gideon will ever forget the Langham Hotel. No Count Tarnow was one thing; no John Dickson and no Ezra Thomas, quite another. How, why, and what next, danced in his bewildered brain; from every centre of what we playfully call the human intellect, incongruous messages were telegraphed; and before the hubbub of dismay had quite subsided, the barrister found himself driving furiously for his chambers. There was at least a cave of refuge; it was at least a place to think in; and he climbed the stair, put his key in the lock and opened the door, with some approach to hope.

It was all dark within, for the night had some time fallen; but Gideon knew his room, he knew where the matches stood on the end of the chimney piece; and he advanced boldly, and in so doing dashed himself against a heavy body, where (slightly altering the expressions of the song) no heavy body should have been. There had been nothing there when Gideon went out, he had locked the door behind him, he had found it locked on his return, no one could have entered, the furniture could not have changed its own position. And yet undeniably there was a something there. He thrust out his hands in the darkness. Yes, there was something, something large, something smooth, something cold.

"Heaven forgive me!" said Gideon, "it feels like a piano."

And the next moment he remembered the vestas in his waistcoat pocket and had struck a light.

It was indeed a piano that met his doubtful gaze; a vast and costly instrument, stained with the rains of the afternoon and defaced with recent scratches. The light of the vesta was reflected from the varnished sides, like a star in quiet water; and in the farther end of the room, the shadow of that strange visitor loomed bulkily and wavered on the wall.

Gideon let the match burn to his fingers, and the darkness close once more on his bewilderment. Then with trembling hands he lit the lamp and drew near. Near or far, there was no doubt of the fact: the thing was a piano. There, where by all the laws of God and man it was impossible that it should be — there the thing impudently stood. Gideon threw open the key-board and struck a chord. Not a sound disturbed the quiet of the room. "Is there anything wrong with me?" he thought, with a pang; and drawing in a seat, obstinately persisted in his attempts to ravish silence, now with sparkling arpeggios, now with a sonata of Beethoven's which (in happier days) he knew to be one of the loudest pieces of that powerful composer. Still not a sound. He gave the Broadwood two great bangs with his clenched fists. All was still as the grave.

The young barrister started to his feet.

"I am stark-staring mad," he cried aloud, "and no one knows it but myself. God's worst curse has fallen on me."

His fingers encountered his watch-chain; instantly he had plucked forth his watch and held it to his ear. He could hear it ticking.

"I am not deaf," he said aloud. "I am only insane. My mind has quitted me forever."

He looked uneasily about the room, and gazed with lack-lustre eyes at the chair in which Mr. Dickson had installed himself. The end of a cigar lay near it on the fender.

"No," he thought, "I don't believe that was a dream; but God knows my mind is failing rapidly. I seem to be hungry, for instance; it's probably another hallucination. Still I might try. I shall have one more good meal; I shall go to the Café Royal, and may possibly be removed from there direct to the asylum."

He wondered with morbid interest, as he descended the stairs, how he would first betray his terrible condition—would he attack a waiter? or eat glass?—and when he had mounted into a cab, he bade the man drive to Nichol's with a lurking fear that there was no such place.

The flaring, gassy entrance of the café speedily set his mind at rest; he was cheered besides to recognise his favourite waiter; his orders appeared to be coherent; the dinner, when it came, was quite a sensible meal, and he ate it with enjoyment. "Upon my word," he reflected, "I am about tempted to indulge a hope. Have I been hasty? Have I done what Robert Skill would have done?" Robert Skill (I need scarcely mention) was the name of the principal character in *Who Put Back the Clock?* It had occurred to the author as a brilliant and probable invention; to readers of a critical turn, Robert appeared scarce upon a level with his surname; but it is the difficulty of the police romance, that the reader is always a man of such vastly greater ingenuity than the writer. In the eyes of his creator, however, Robert Skill was a word to conjure with; the thought braced and spurred him; what that brilliant creature would have done, Gideon would do also. This frame of mind is not uncommon: the distressed general, the baited divine, the hesitating author, decide severally to do what Napoleon, what St. Paul, what Shakespeare would have done; and there remains only the minor question, What is that? In Gideon's case, one thing was clear: Skill was a man of singular decision, he would have taken some step (whatever it was) at once; and the only step that Gideon could think of was to return to his chambers.

This being achieved, all further inspiration failed him, and he stood pitifully staring at the instrument of his confusion. To touch the keys again was more than he durst venture on; whether they had maintained their former silence, or responded with the tones of the last trump, it would have equally dethroned his resolution. "It may be a practical jest," he reflected, "though it seems elaborate and costly. And yet what else can it be? It *must* be a practical jest." And just then his eye fell upon a feature which seemed corroborative of that view; The pagoda of cigars which Michael had erected ere he left the chambers. "Why that?" reflected Gideon. "It seems entirely irresponsible." And drawing near, he gingerly demolished it. "A key," he thought. "Why that? And why so conspicuously placed?" He made the circuit of the instrument, and perceived the keyhole at the back. "Aha! this is what the key is for," said he. "They wanted me to look inside. Stranger and stranger." And with that, he turned the key and raised the lid.

In what antics of agony, in what fits of flighty resolution, in what collapses of despair, Gideon consumed the night, it would be ungenerous to inquire too closely.

That trill of tiny song with which the eaves-birds of London welcome the approach of day, found him limp and rumpled and bloodshot, and with a mind still vacant of resource. He rose and looked forth unrejoicingly on blinded windows, an empty street, and the grey daylight dotted with the yellow lamps. There are mornings when the city seems to awake with a sick headache; this was one of them; and still the twittering reveille of the sparrows stirred in Gideon's spirit.

"Day here," he thought, "and I still helpless! This must come to an end." And he locked up the piano, put the key in his pocket, and set forth in quest of coffee. As he went, his mind trudged for the hundredth time a certain mill-road of terrors, misgivings, and regrets. To call in the police, to give up the body, to cover London with handbills describing John Dickson and Ezra Thomas, to fill the papers with paragraphs, *Mysterious Occurrence in the Temple — Mr. Forsyth admitted to bail,* this was one course, an easy course, a safe course; but not, the more he reflected on it, not a pleasant one. For, was it not to publish abroad a number of singular facts about himself? A child ought to have seen through the story of these adventures, and he had gaped and swallowed it. A barrister of the least self-respect should have refused to listen to clients who came before him in a manner so irregular, and he had listened. And oh, if he had only listened; but he had gone upon their errand — he, a barrister, uninstructed even by the shadow of a solicitor — upon an errand fit only for a private detective; and alas! — and for the hundredth time, the blood surged to his brow — he had taken their money! "No," said he, "the thing is as plain as St. Paul's. I shall be dishonoured! I have smashed my career for a five-pound note."

Between the possibility of being hanged in all innocence, and the certainty of a public and merited disgrace, no gentleman of spirit could long hesitate. After three gulps of that hot, snuffy, and muddy beverage, that passes on the streets of London for a decoction of the coffee berry, Gideon's mind was made up. He would do without the police. He must face the other side of the dilemma, and be Robert Skill in earnest. What would Robert Skill have done ? How does a gentleman dispose of a dead body, honestly come by ? He remembered the inimitable story of the hunchback; reviewed its course, and dismissed it for a worthless guide. It was impossible to prop a corpse on the corner of Tottenham Court Road, without arousing fatal curiosity in the bosoms of the passers by; as for lowering it down a London chimney, the physical obstacles were insurmountable. To get it on board a train and drop it out, or on the top of an omnibus and drop it off, were equally out of the question. To get it on a yacht and drop it overboard, was more conceivable; but for a man of moderate means, it seemed extravagant. The hire of the yacht was in itself a consideration; the subsequent support of the whole crew (which seemed a necessary consequence) was simply not to be thought of. His uncle and the houseboat here occurred in very luminous colours to his mind. A musical composer (say, of the name of Jimson) might very well suffer, like Hogarth's musician before him, from the disturbances of London. He might very well be pressed for time to finish an opera — say the comic opera *Orange Pekoe* — *Orange Pekoe,* music by Jimson — "this young maëstro, one of the most promising of our recent English school" — vigorous entrance of the drums, etc.— the whole character of Jimson and his music arose in bulk before the mind of Gideon. What more likely than Jimson's arrival with a grand piano (say, at Padwick), and his residence in a houseboat alone with the unfinished score of *Orange Pekoe?* His subsequent disappearance, leaving nothing behind but an empty piano case, it might be more difficult to account for. And yet even that was susceptible of explanation. For, suppose Jimson had gone mad over a fugal passage, and had thereupon destroyed the accomplice of his infamy, and plunged into the welcome river? What end, on the whole, more probable for a modern musician?

"By jove, I'll do it," cried Gideon. "Jimson is the boy!"

CHAPTER XI

THE MAËSTRO JIMSON

MR. EDWARD HUGH BLOOMFIELD having announced his intention to stay in the neighbourhood of Maidenhead, what more probable than that the Maëstro Jimson should turn his mind toward Padwick? Near this pleasant riverside village, he remembered to have observed an ancient, weedy houseboat lying moored beside a tuft of willows. It had stirred in him, in his careless hours, as he pulled down the river under a more familiar name, a certain sense of the romantic; and when the nice contrivance of his story was already complete in his mind, he had come near pulling it all down again, like an ungrateful clock, in order to introduce a chapter in which Robert Skill (who was always being decoyed somewhere) should be decoyed on board that lonely hulk by Lord Bellew and the American desperado Gin Sling. It was fortunate he had not done so, he reflected; since the hulk was now required for very different purposes.

Jimson, a man of inconspicuous costume, but insinuating manners, had little difficulty in finding the hireling who had charge of the houseboat, and still less in persuading him to resign his care. The rent was almost nominal, the entry immediate, the key was exchanged against a suitable advance in money; and Jimson returned to town by the afternoon train to see about despatching his piano.

"I will be down to-morrow," he had said, reassuringly. "My opera is waited for with such impatience, you know."

And, sure enough, about the hour of noon on the following day, Jimson might have been observed ascending the riverside road that goes from Padwick to Great Haverham, carrying in one hand a basket of provisions, and under the other arm a leather case containing (it is to be conjectured) the score of *Orange Pekoe.* It was October weather; the stone-grey sky was full of larks, the leaden mirror of the Thames brightened with autumnal foliage, and the fallen leaves of the chestnuts chirped under the composer's footing. There is no time of the year in England more courageous; and Jimson, though he was not without his troubles, whistled as he went.

A little above Padwick, the river lies very solitary. On the opposite shore the trees of a private park inclose the view, the chimneys of the mansion just pricking forth above their clusters; on the near side, the path is bordered by willows. Close among these lay the house-boat, a thing so soiled by the tears of the overhanging willows, so grown upon with parasites, so decayed, so battered, so neglected, such a haunt of rats, so advertised a storehouse of rheumatic agonies, that the heart of an intending occupant might well recoil. A plank, by way of flying drawbridge, joined it to the shore. And it was a dreary moment for Jimson when he pulled this after him and found himself alone on this unwholesome fortress. He could hear the rats scuttle and flop in the abhorred interior; the key cried among the wards like a thing in pain; the sitting-room was deep in dust, and smelt strong of bilge-water. It could not be called a cheerful spot, even for a composer absorbed in beloved toil; how much less for a young gentleman, haunted by alarms and awaiting the arrival of a corpse!

He sat down, cleared away a piece of the table, and attacked the cold luncheon in his basket. In case of any subsequent inquiry into the fate of Jimson, it was desirable he should be little seen; in other words, that he should spend the day entirely in the house; to this end, and further to corroborate his fable, he had brought in the leather case not only writing materials, but a ream of large-size music paper, such as he considered suitable for an ambitious character like Jimson's.

"And now to work," said he, when he had satisfied his appetite. "We must leave traces of the wretched man's activity." And he wrote in bold characters:

ORANGE PEKOE
Op. 17
J. B. JIMSON
Vocal and p. f. score

"I suppose they never do begin like this," reflected Gideon; "but then it's quite out of the question for me to tackle a full score, and Jimson was so unconventional. A dedication would be found convincing, I believe. 'Dedicated to' (let me see) 'to William Ewart Gladstone, by his obedient servant the composer.' And now some music: I had better avoid the overture, it seems to present difficulties. Let's give an air for the tenor: Key —

O, something modern! — seven sharps." And he made a business-like signature across the staves, and then paused and browsed for a while on the handle of his pen. Melody, with no better inspiration than a sheet of paper, is not usually found to spring unbidden in the mind of the amateur; nor is the key of seven sharps a place of much repose to the untried. He cast away that sheet. "It will help to build up the character of Jimson," Gideon remarked; and again waited on the muse, in various keys and on divers sheets of paper, but all with results so inconsiderable that he stood aghast. "It's very odd," thought he. "I seem to have less fancy than I thought; or this is an off-day with me; yet Jimson must leave something." And again he bent himself to the task.

Presently the penetrating chill of the houseboat began to attack the very seat of life. He desisted from his unremunerative trial; and to the audible annoyance of the rats, walked briskly up and down the cabin. Still he was cold. "This is all nonsense," said he. "I don't care about the risk, but I will not catch a catarrh. I must get out of this den."

He stepped on deck, and passing to the bow of his embarcation, looked for the first time up the river. He started. Only a few hundred yards above another houseboat lay moored among the willows. It was very spick and span, an elegant canoe hung at the stern, the windows were concealed by snowy curtains; a flag floated from a staff. The more Gideon looked at it the more there mingled with his disgust a sense of impotent surprise. It was very like his uncle's houseboat; it was exceedingly like, it was identical. But for two circumstances he could have sworn it was the same. The first, that his uncle had gone to Maidenhead, might be explained away by that flightiness of purpose which is so common a trait among the more than usually manly. The second, however, was conclusive. It was not in the least like Mr. Bloomfield to display a banner on his floating residence; and if he ever did, it would certainly be dyed in hues of emblematical propriety. Now the Squirradical, like the vast majority of the more manly, had drawn knowledge at the wells of Cambridge — he was wooden spoon in the year 1850; and the flag upon the houseboat streamed on the afternoon air with the colours of that seat of Toryism, that cradle of Puseyism, that home of the inexact and the effete — Oxford.

Still it was strangely like, thought Gideon.

And as he thus looked and thought, the door opened, and a young lady stepped forth on deck. The barrister dropped and fled into his cabin; it was Julia Hazeltine! Through the window he watched her draw in the canoe, get on board of it, cast off, and come dropping down stream in his direction.

"Well, all is up now," said he, and he fell on a seat.

"Good-afternoon, miss," said a voice on the water. Gideon knew it for the voice of his landlord.

"Good-afternoon," replied Julia, "but I don't know who you are; do I? Oh, yes, I do though. You are the nice man that gave us leave to sketch from the old houseboat."

Gideon's heart leaped with fear.

"That's it," returned the man. "And what I wanted to say was as you couldn't do it any more. You see I've let it."

"Let it!" cried Julia.

"Let it for a month," said the man. "Seems strange, don't it? Can't see what the party wants with it!"

"It seems very romantic of him, I think," said Julia. "What sort of a person is he?"

Julia in her canoe, the landlord in his wherry, were close alongside, and holding on by the gunwale of the houseboat; so that not a word was lost on Gideon.

"He's a music man," said the landlord, "or at least that's what he told me, miss; come down here to write an op'ra."

"Really!" cried Julia, "I never heard of anything so delightful! Why, we shall be able to slip down at night and hear him improvise! What is his name?"

"Jimson," said the man.

"Jimson?" repeated Julia, and interrogated her memory in vain. But indeed our rising school of English music boasts so many professors that we rarely hear of one till he is made a baronet. "Are you sure you have it right?"

"Made him spell it to me," replied the landlord. "J-I-M-S-O-N — Jimson; and his op'ra's called — some kind of tea."

"Some kind of tea!" cried the girl. "What a very singular name for an opera! What can it be about?" And Gideon heard her pretty laughter flow abroad. "We must try to get acquainted with this Mr. Jimson; I feel sure he must be nice."

"Well, miss, I'm afraid I must be going on. I've got to be at Haverham, you see."

"Oh, don't let me keep you, you kind man!" said Julia. "Good-afternoon."

"Good-afternoon to you, miss."

Gideon sat in the cabin a prey to the most harrowing thoughts. Here he was anchored to a rotting houseboat, soon to be anchored to it still more emphatically by the presence of the corpse; and here was the country buzzing about him, and young ladies already proposing pleasure parties to surround his house at night. Well, that meant the gallows; and much he cared for that. What troubled him now was Julia's indescribable levity. That girl would scrape acquaintance with anybody; she had no reserve, none of the enamel of the lady. She was familiar with a brute like his landlord; she took an immediate interest (which she lacked even the delicacy to conceal) in a creature like Jimson! He could conceive her asking Jimson to have tea with her! And it was for a girl like this that a man like Gideon — Down, manly heart!

He was interrupted by a sound that sent him whipping behind the door in a trice. Miss Hazeltine had stepped on board the houseboat. Her sketch was promising; judging from the stillness she supposed Jimson not yet come; and she had decided to seize occasion and complete the work of art. Down she sat therefore in the bow, produced her block and water-colours, and was soon singing over (what used to be called) the ladylike accomplishment. Now and then indeed her song was interrupted, as she searched in her memory for some of the odious little receipts by means of which the game is practised — or used to be practised in the brave days of old; they say the world, and those ornaments of the world, young ladies, are become more sophisticated now; but Julia had probably studied under Pitman, and she stood firm in the old ways.

Gideon, meanwhile, stood behind the door, afraid to move, afraid to breathe, afraid to think of what must follow, racked by confinement and borne to the ground with tedium. This particular phase, he felt with gratitude, could not last forever; whatever impended (even the gallows, he bitterly and perhaps erroneously reflected) could not fail to be a relief. To calculate cubes occurred to him as an ingenious and even profitable refuge from distressing thoughts, and he threw his manhood into that dreary exercise.

Thus, then, were these two young persons occupied, Gideon attacking the perfect number with resolution; Julia vigorously stippling incongruous colours on her block, when Providence despatched into these waters a steam launch asthmatically panting up the Thames. All along the banks the water swelled and fell, and the reeds rustled. The houseboat itself, that ancient stationary creature, became suddenly imbued with life, and rolled briskly at her moorings, like a sea-going ship when she begins to smell the harbour bar. The wash had nearly died away, and the quick panting of the launch sounded already faint and far off, when Gideon was startled by a cry from Julia. Peering through the window, he beheld her staring disconsolately down stream at the fast-vanishing canoe. The barrister (whatever were his faults) displayed on this occasion a promptitude worthy of his hero, Robert Skill; with one effort of his mind he foresaw what was about to follow; with one movement of his body he dropped to the floor and crawled under the table.

Julia, on her part, was not yet alive to her position. She saw she had lost the canoe, and she looked forward with something less than avidity to her next interview with Mr. Bloomfield; but she had no idea that she was imprisoned, for she knew of the plank bridge.

She made the circuit of the house, and found the door open and the bridge withdrawn. It was plain, then, that Jimson must have come; plain, too, that he must be on board. He must be a very shy man to have suffered this invasion of his residence, and made no sign; and her courage rose higher at the thought. He must come now, she must force him from his privacy, for the plank was too heavy for her single strength; so she tapped upon the open door. Then she tapped again.

"Mr. Jimson," she cried, "Mr. Jimson! here, come!—you *must* come, you know, sooner or later, for I can't get off without you. Oh, don't be so exceedingly silly! Oh, please, come!"

Still there was no reply.

"If he *is* here he must be mad," she thought with a little fear. And the next moment she remembered he had probably gone abroad like herself in a boat. In that case, she might as well see the houseboat, and she pushed open the door and stepped in. Under the table, where he lay smothered with dust, Gideon's heart stood still.

There were the remains of Jimson's lunch. "He likes rather nice things to eat," she thought. "Oh, I am sure he is quite a delightful man. I wonder if he is as good-looking as Mr. Forsyth. Mrs. Jimson—I don't believe it sounds as nice as Mrs. Forsyth; but then 'Gideon' is so really odious! And here is some of his music too; this is delightful. *Orange Pekoe*—Oh, that's what he meant by some kind of tea.” And she trilled with laughter. “*Adagio molto espressivo, sempre legato,*” she read next. (For the literary part of a composer's business Gideon was well equipped.) “How very strange to have all these directions, and only three or four notes! Oh, here's another with some more. *Andante patetico.*” And she began to glance over the music. “O dear me,” she thought, “he must be terribly modern! It all seems discords to me. Let's try the air. It is very strange, it seems familiar.” She began to sing it, and suddenly broke off with laughter. “Why, it's *Tommy make room for your Uncle!*” she cried aloud, so that the soul of Gideon was filled with bitterness. “*Andante patetico,* indeed! The man must be a mere impostor.”

And just at this moment there came a confused, scuffling sound from underneath the table; a strange note, like that of a barn-door fowl, ushered in a most explosive sneeze; the head of the sufferer was at the same time brought smartly in contact with the boards above; and the sneeze was followed by a hollow groan.

Julia fled to the door, and there, with the salutary instinct of the brave, turned and faced the danger. There was no pursuit. The sounds continued; below the table a crouching figure was indistinctly to be seen jostled by the throes of a sneezing fit; and that was all.

“Surely,” thought Julia, “this is most unusual behaviour. He cannot be a man of the world!”

Meanwhile the dust of years had been disturbed by the young barrister's convulsions; and the sneezing fit was succeeded by a passionate access of coughing.

Julia began to feel a certain interest. "I am afraid you are really quite ill," she said, drawing a little nearer. "Please don't let me put you out, and do not stay under that table, Mr. Jimson. Indeed it cannot be good for you."

Mr. Jimson only answered by a distressing cough; and the next moment the girl was on her knees and their faces had almost knocked together under the table.

"Oh, my gracious goodness!" exclaimed Miss Hazeltine, and sprang to her feet. "Mr. Forsyth gone mad!"

"I am not mad," said the gentleman ruefully, extricating himself from his position. "Dearest Miss Hazeltine, I vow to you upon my knees I am not mad!"

"You are not!" she cried, panting.

"I know," he said, "that to a superficial eye my conduct may appear unconventional."

"If you are not mad, it was no conduct at all," cried the girl, with a flash of colour, "and showed you did not care one penny for my feelings!"

"This is the very devil and all. I know—I admit that," cried Gideon, with a great effect of manly candour.

"It was abominable conduct!" said Julia, with energy.

"I know it must have shaken your esteem," said the barrister. "But, dearest Miss Hazeltine, I beg of you to hear me out; my behaviour, strange as it may seem, is not unsusceptible of explanation; and I positively cannot and will not consent to continue to try to exist without — without the esteem of one whom I admire — the moment is ill-chosen, I am well aware of that; but I repeat the expression — one whom I admire."

A touch of amusement appeared on Miss Hazeltine's face. "Very well," said she, "come out of this dreadfully cold place, and let us sit down on deck." The barrister dolefully followed her. "Now," said she, making herself comfortable against the end of the house, "go on. I will hear you out." And then seeing him stand before her with so much obvious disrelish to the task, she was suddenly overcome with laughter. Julia's laugh was a thing to ravish lovers; she rolled her mirthful descant with the freedom and the melody of a blackbird's song upon the river, and repeated by the echoes of the further bank, it seemed a thing in its own place and a sound native to the open air. There was only one creature who heard it without joy, and that was her unfortunate admirer.

"Miss Hazeltine," he said, in a voice that tottered with annoyance, "I speak as your sincere well-wisher, but this can only be called levity."

Julia made great eyes at him.

"I can't withdraw the word," he said; "already the freedom with which I heard you hobnobbing with a boatman gave me exquisite pain. Then there was a want of reserve about Jimson——"

"But Jimson appears to be yourself," objected Julia.

"I am far from denying that," cried the barrister, "but you did not know it at the time. What could Jimson be to you? Who was Jimson? Miss Hazeltine, it cut me to the heart."

"Really this seems to me to be very silly," returned Julia, with severe decision. "You have behaved in the most extraordinary manner; you pretend you are able to explain your conduct, and instead of doing so you begin to attack me."

"I am well aware of that," replied Gideon. "I—I will make a clean breast of it. When you know all the circumstances you will be able to excuse me."

And sitting down beside her on the deck, he poured forth his miserable history.

"Oh, Mr. Forsyth," she cried, when he had done. "I am—so—sorry! I wish I hadn't laughed at you—only you know you really were so exceedingly funny. But I wish I hadn't, and I wouldn't either if I had only known." And she gave him her hand.

Gideon kept it in his own. "You do not think the worse of me for this?" he asked, tenderly.

"Because you have been so silly and got into such dreadful trouble? you poor boy, no!" cried Julia; and in the warmth of the moment, reached him her other hand; "you may count on me," she added.

"Really?" said Gideon.

"Really and really!" replied the girl.

"I do then, and I will," cried the young man, "I admit the moment is not well chosen; but I have no friends—to speak of."

"No more have I," said Julia. "But don't you think it's perhaps time you gave me back my hands?"

"La ci darem la mano," said the barrister, "the merest moment more! I have so few friends," he added.

"I thought it was considered such a bad account of a young man to have no friends," observed Julia.

"Oh, but I have crowds of *friends!"* cried Gideon. "That's not what I mean. I feel the moment is ill chosen; but oh, Julia, if you could only see yourself!"

"Mr. Forsyth——"

"Don't call me by that beastly name!" cried the youth. "Call me Gideon!"

"Oh, never that!" from Julia. "Besides, we have known each other such a short time."

"Not at all!" protested Gideon. "We met at Bournemouth ever so long ago. I never forgot you since. Say you never forgot me. Say you never forgot me, and call me Gideon!"

"Isn't this rather — a want of reserve about Jimson?" inquired the girl.

"Oh, I know I am an ass," cried the barrister, "and I don't care a half-penny! I know I'm an ass, and you may laugh at me to your heart's delight." And as Julia's lips opened with a smile, he once more dropped into music. "There's the Land of Cherry Isle!" he sang, courting her with his eyes.

"It's like an opera," said Julia, rather faintly.

"What should it be?" said Gideon. "Am I not Jimson? It would be strange if I did not serenade my love. Oh, yes, I mean the word, my Julia; and I mean to win you. I am in dreadful trouble, and I have not a penny of my own, and I have cut the silliest figure; and yet I mean to win you, Julia. Look at me, if you can, and tell me no!"

She looked at him; and whatever her eyes may have told him, it is to be supposed he took a pleasure in the message, for he read it a long while.

"And Uncle Ned will give us some money to go on upon in the meanwhile," he said, at last.

"Well, I call that cool!" said a cheerful voice at his elbow.

Gideon and Julia sprang apart with wonderful alacrity; the latter annoyed to observe that although they had never moved since they sat down, they were now quite close together; both presenting faces of a very heightened colour to the eyes of Mr. Edward Hugh Bloomfield. That gentleman, coming up the river in his boat, had captured the truant canoe, and divining what had happened, had thought to steal a march on Miss Hazeltine at her sketch. He had unexpectedly brought down two birds with one stone; and as he looked upon the pair of flushed and breathless culprits, the pleasant human instinct of the match-maker softened his heart.

"Well, I call that cool," he repeated; "you seem to count very securely upon Uncle Ned. But look here, Gid, I thought I had told you to keep away?"

"To keep away from Maidenhead," replied Gid. "But how should I expect to find you here?"

"There is something in that," Mr. Bloomfield admitted. "You see I thought it better that even you should be ignorant of my address; those rascals, the Finsburys, would have wormed it out of you. And just to put them off the scent I hoisted these abominable colours. But that is not all, Gid; you promised me to work, and here I find you playing the fool at Padwick."

"Please, Mr. Bloomfield, you must not be hard on Mr. Forsyth," said Julia. "Poor boy, he is in dreadful straits."

"What's this, Gid?" inquired the uncle. "Have you been fighting? or is it a bill?"

These, in the opinion of the Squirradical, were the two misfortunes incident to gentlemen; and indeed both were culled from his own career. He had once put his name (as a matter of form) on a friend's paper; it had cost him a cool thousand; and the friend had gone about with the fear of death upon him ever since, and never turned a corner without scouting in front of him for Mr. Bloomfield and the oaken staff. As for fighting, the Squirradical was always on the brink of it; and once, when (in the character of president of a radical club) he had cleared out the hall of his opponents, things had gone even further. Mr. Holtum, the conservative candidate, who lay so long on the bed of sickness, was prepared to swear to Mr. Bloomfield. "I will swear to it in any court — it was the hand of that brute that struck me down," he was reported to have said; and when he was thought to be sinking, it was known that he had made an *ante-mortem* statement in that sense. It was a cheerful day for the Squirradical when Holtum was restored to his brewery.

"It's much worse than that," said Gideon, "a combination of circumstances really providentially unjust — a — in fact, a syndicate of murderers seem to have perceived my latent ability to rid them of the traces of their crime. It's a legal study, after all, you see!" And with these words, Gideon, for the second time that day, began to describe the adventures of the Broadwood Grand.

"I must write to *The Times,*" cried Mr. Bloomfield.

"Do you want to get me disbarred?" asked Gideon.

"Disbarred! Come, it can't be as bad as that," said his uncle. "It's a good, honest, liberal government that's in, and they would certainly move at my request. Thank God, the days of tory jobbery are at an end."

"It wouldn't do, Uncle Ned," said Gideon.

"But you're not mad enough," cried Mr. Bloomfield, "to persist in trying to dispose of it yourself?"

"There is no other path open to me," said Gideon.

"It's not common-sense, and I will not hear of it," cried Mr. Bloomfield. "I command you, positively, Gid, to desist from this criminal interference."

"Very well, then, I hand it over to you," said Gideon, "and you can do what you like with the dead body."

"God forbid!" ejaculated the president of the radical club, "I'll have nothing to do with it."

"Then you must allow me to do the best I can," returned his nephew. "Believe me, I have a distinct talent for this sort of difficulty."

"We might forward it to that pest-house, the Conservative Club," observed Mr. Bloomfield. "It might damage them in the eyes of their constituents; and it could be profitably worked up in the local journal."

"If you see any political capital in the thing," said Gideon, "you may have it for me."

"No, no, Gid — no, no, I thought *you* might. I will have no hand in the thing. On reflection, it's highly undesirable that either I or Miss Hazeltine should linger here. We might be observed," said the president, looking up and down the river; "and in my public position, the consequences would be painful for the party. And at any rate, it's dinner time."

"What?" cried Gideon, plunging for his watch. "And so it is! Great heaven, the piano should have been here hours ago!"

Mr. Bloomfield was clambering back into his boat; but at these words he paused.

"I saw it arrive myself at the station; I hired a carrier man; he had a round to make, but he was to be here by four at the latest," cried the barrister. "No doubt the piano is open, and the body found."

"You must fly at once," cried Mr. Bloomfield, "it's the only manly step."

"But suppose it's all right?" wailed Gideon. "Suppose the piano comes, and I am not here to receive it? I shall have hanged myself by my cowardice. No, Uncle Ned, inquiries must be made in Padwick; I dare not go, of course; but you may, you could hang about the police office, don't you see?"

"No, Gid—no, my dear nephew," said Mr. Bloomfield, with the voice of one on the rack. "I regard you with the most sacred affection; and I thank God I am an Englishman—and all that. But not—not the police, Gid."

"Then you desert me?" said Gideon. "Say it plainly."

"Far from it! far from it!" protested Mr. Bloomfield. "I only propose caution. Common-sense, Gid, should always be an Englishman's guide."

"Will you let me speak?" said Julia. "I think Gideon had better leave this dreadful houseboat, and wait among the willows over there. If the piano comes, then he could step out and take it in; and if the police come, he could slip into our houseboat, and there needn't be any more Jimson at all. He could go to bed, and we could burn his clothes (couldn't we?) in the steam launch; and then really it seems as if it would be all right. Mr. Bloomfield is so respectable, you know, and such a leading character, it would be quite impossible even to fancy that he could be mixed up with it."

"This young lady has strong common-sense," said the Squirradical.

"Oh, I don't think I'm at all a fool," said Julia, with conviction.

"But what if neither of them come?" asked Gideon; "what shall I do then?"

"Why, then," said she, "you had better go down to the village after dark; and I can go with you, and then I am sure you could never be suspected; and even if you were, I could tell them it was altogether a mistake."

"I will not permit that — I will not suffer Miss Hazeltine to go," cried Mr. Bloomfield.

"Why?" asked Julia.

Mr. Bloomfield had not the least desire to tell her why, for it was simply a craven fear of being drawn himself into the imbroglio; but with the usual tactics of a man who is ashamed of himself, he took the high hand. "God forbid, my dear Miss Hazeltine, that I should dictate to a lady on the question of propriety —" he began.

"Oh, is that all?" interrupted Julia. "Then we must go all three."

"Caught!" thought the Squirradical.

CHAPTER XII

POSITIVELY THE LAST APPEARANCE OF THE BROADWOOD GRAND

ENGLAND is supposed to be unmusical; but without dwelling on the patronage extended to the organ-grinder, without seeking to found any argument on the prevalence of the jew's trump, there is surely one instrument that may be said to be national in the fullest acceptance of the word. The herdboy in the broom, already musical in the days of Father Chaucer, startles (and perhaps pains) the lark with this exiguous pipe; and in the hands of the skilled bricklayer,

> The thing becomes a trumpet, whence he blows

(as a general rule) either *The British Grenadiers*, or *Cherry Ripe.* The latter air is indeed the shibboleth and diploma piece of the penny whistler; I hazard a guess it was originally composed for this instrument. It is singular enough that a man should be able to gain a livelihood, or even to tide over a period of unemployment, by the display of his proficiency upon the penny whistle; still more so, that the professional should almost invariably confine himself to *Cherry Ripe.* But indeed, singularities surround the subject, thick like blackberries. Why, for instance, should the pipe be called a penny whistle? I think no one ever bought it for a penny. Why should the alternative name be tin whistle? I am grossly deceived if it be made of tin. Lastly, in what deaf catacomb, in what earless desert, does the beginner pass the excruciating interval of his apprenticeship? We have all heard people learning the piano, the fiddle, and the cornet; but the young of the penny whistler (like that of the salmon) is occult from observation; he is never heard until proficient; and providence (perhaps alarmed by the works of Mr. Mallock) defends human hearing from his first attempts upon the upper octave.

A really noteworthy thing was taking place in a green lane, not far from Padwick. On the bench of a carrier's cart there sat a tow-headed, lanky, modest-looking youth; the reins were on his lap; the whip lay behind him in the interior of the cart; the horse proceeded without guidance or encouragement; the carrier (or the carrier's man) wrapt into a higher sphere than that of his daily occupations, his looks dwelling on the skies, devoted himself wholly to a brand new D penny whistle, whence he diffidently endeavoured to elicit that pleasing melody *The Ploughboy.* To any observant person who should have chanced to saunter in that lane, the hour would have been thrilling. "Here at last," he would have said, "is the beginner."

The tow-headed youth (whose name was Harker) had just encored himself for the nineteenth time, when he was struck into the extreme of confusion by the discovery that he was not alone.

"There you have it!" cried a manly voice from the side of the road. "That's as good as I want to hear. Perhaps a leetle oilier in the run," the voice suggested, with meditative gusto. "Give it us again."

Harker glanced, from the depths of his humiliation, at the speaker. He beheld a powerful, sun-brown, clean-shaven fellow, about forty years of age, striding beside the cart with a non-commissioned military bearing, and (as he strode) spinning in the air a cane. The fellow's clothes were very bad, but he looked clean and self-reliant.

"I'm only a beginner," gasped the blushing Harker, "I didn't think anybody could hear me."

"Well, I like that!" returned the other. "You're a pretty old beginner. Come, I'll give you a lead myself. Give us a seat here beside you."

The next moment the military gentleman was perched on the cart, pipe in hand. He gave the instrument a knowing rattle on the shaft, mouthed it, appeared to commune for a moment with the muse, and dashed into *The Girl I left behind Me.* He was a great, rather than a fine, performer; he lacked the bird-like richness; he could scarce have extracted all the honey out of *Cherry Ripe;* he did not fear—he even ostentatiously displayed and seemed to revel in the shrillness of the instrument; but in fire, speed, precision, evenness, and fluency; in linked agility of *jimmy*—a technical expression, by your leave, answering to *warblers* on the bagpipe; and perhaps, above all, in that inspiring side-glance of the eye, with which he followed the effect and (as by a human appeal) eked out the insufficiency of his performance: in these, the fellow stood without a rival. Harker listened: *The Girl I left behind Me* filled him with despair; *The Soldier's Joy* carried him beyond jealousy into generous enthusiasm.

"Turn about," said the military gentleman, offering the pipe.

"Oh, not after you!" cried Harker; "you're a professional."

"No," said his companion; "an amatyure like yourself. That's one style of play, yours is the other, and I like it best. But I began when I was a boy, you see, before my taste was formed. When you're my age you'll play that thing like a cornet-à-piston. Give us that air again; how does it go?" and he affected to endeavour to recall *The Ploughboy*.

A timid, insane hope sprang in the breast of Harker. Was it possible? Was there something in his playing? It had, indeed, seemed to him at times as if he got a kind of a richness out of it. Was he a genius? Meantime the military gentleman stumbled over the air.

"No," said the unhappy Harker, "that's not quite it. It goes this way—just to show you."

And, taking the pipe between his lips, he sealed his doom. When he had played the air, and then a second time, and a third; when the military gentleman had tried it once more, and once more failed; when it became clear to Harker that he, the blushing débutant, was actually giving a lesson to this full-grown flutist—and the flutist under his care was not very brilliantly progressing—how am I to tell what floods of glory brightened the autumnal countryside; how, unless the reader were an amateur himself, describe the heights of idiotic vanity to which the carrier climbed? One significant fact shall paint the situation: thenceforth it was Harker who played, and the military gentleman listened and approved.

As he listened, however, he did not forget the habit of soldierly precaution, looking both behind and before. He looked behind and computed the value of the carrier's load, divining the contents of the brown paper parcels and the portly hamper, and briefly setting down the grand piano in the brand new piano-case as "difficult to get rid of." He looked before, and spied at the corner of the green lane a little country public-house embowered in roses. "I'll have a shy at it," concluded the military gentleman, and roundly proposed a glass.

"Well, I'm not a drinking man," said Harker.

"Look here, now," cut in the other, "I'll tell you who I am: I'm Colour-sergeant Brand of the Blankth. That'll tell you if I'm a drinking man or not." It might and it might not, thus a Greek chorus would have intervened, and gone on to point out how very far it fell short of telling why the sergeant was tramping a country lane in tatters; or even to argue that he must have pretermitted some while ago his labours for the general defence, and (in the interval) possibly turned his attention to oakum. But there was no Greek chorus present; and the man of war went on to contend that drinking was one thing and a friendly glass another.

In the Blue Lion, which was the name of the country public-house, Colour-sergeant Brand introduced his new friend, Mr. Harker, to a number of ingenious mixtures, calculated to prevent the approaches of intoxication. These he explained to be "rekisite" in the service, so that a self-respecting officer should always appear upon parade in a condition honourable to his corps. The most efficacious of these devices was to lace a pint of mild ale with twopence worth of London gin. I am pleased to hand in this recipe to the discerning reader, who may find it useful even in civil station; for its effect upon Mr. Harker was revolutionary. He must be helped on board his own wagon, where he proceeded to display a spirit entirely given over to mirth and music, alternately hooting with laughter, to which the sergeant hastened to bear chorus, and incoherently tootling on the pipe. The man of war, meantime, unostentatiously possessed himself of the reins. It was plain he had a taste for the secluded beauties of an English landscape; for the cart, although it wandered under his guidance for some time, was never observed to issue on the dusty highway, journeying between hedge and ditch, and for the most part under overhanging boughs. It was plain, besides, he had an eye to the true interests of Mr. Harker; for though the cart drew up more than once at the doors of public-houses, it was only the sergeant who set foot to ground, and being equipped himself with a quart bottle, once more proceeded on his rural drive.

To give any idea of the complexity of the sergeant's course, a map of that part of Middlesex would be required, and my publisher is averse from the expense. Suffice it, that a little after the night had closed, the cart was brought to a standstill in a woody road; where the sergeant lifted from among the parcels, and tenderly deposited upon the wayside, the inanimate form of Harker.

"If you come to before daylight," thought the sergeant, "I shall be surprised for one."

From the various pockets of the slumbering carrier, he gently collected the sum of seventeen shillings and eightpence sterling; and getting once more into the cart, drove thoughtfully away.

"If I was exactly sure of where I was, it would be a good job," he reflected. "Anyway, here's a corner."

He turned it, and found himself upon the riverside. A little above him the lights of a houseboat shone cheerfully; and already close at hand, so close that it was impossible to avoid their notice, three persons, a lady and two gentlemen, were deliberately drawing near. The sergeant put his trust in the convenient darkness of the night, and drove on to meet them. One of the gentlemen, who was of a portly figure, walked in the midst of the fairway and presently held up a staff by way of signal.

"My man, have you seen anything of a carrier's cart?" he cried.

Dark as it was, it seemed to the sergeant as though the slimmer of the two gentlemen had made a motion to prevent the other speaking, and (finding himself too late) had skipped aside with some alacrity. At another season, Sergeant Brand would have paid more attention to the fact; but he was then immersed in the perils of his own predicament.

"A carrier's cart?" said he, with a perceptible uncertainty of voice. "No, sir."

"Ah!" said the portly gentleman, and stood aside to let the sergeant pass. The lady appeared to bend forward and study the cart with every mark of sharpened curiosity; the slimmer gentleman still keeping in the rear.

"I wonder what the devil they would be at," thought Sergeant Brand; and looking fearfully back, he saw the trio standing together in the midst of the way, like folk consulting. The bravest of military heroes are not always equal to themselves as to their reputation; and fear, on some singular provocation, will find a lodgement in the most unfamiliar bosom. The word "detective" might have been heard to gurgle in the sergeant's throat; and vigorously applying the whip, he fled up the riverside road to Great Haverham, at the gallop of the carrier's horse. The lights of the houseboat flashed upon the flying wagon as it passed; the beat of hoofs and the rattle of the vehicle gradually coalesced and died away; and presently, to the trio on the riverside, silence had redescended.

"It's the most extraordinary thing," cried the slimmer of the two gentlemen, "but that's the cart!"

"And I know I saw a piano," said the girl.

"Oh, it's the cart, certainly; and the extraordinary thing is, it's not the man," added the first.

"It must be the man, Gid, it must be," said the portly one.

"Well, then, why is he running away?" asked Gideon.

"His horse bolted, I suppose," said the Squirradical.

"Nonsense! I heard the whip going like a flail," said Gideon. "It simply defies the human reason."

"I'll tell you," broke in the girl, "he came round that corner. Suppose we went and — what do they call it in books? — followed his trail? There may be a house there, or somebody who saw him, or something."

"Well, suppose we did, for the fun of the thing," said Gideon.

The fun of the thing (it would appear) consisted in the extremely close juxtaposition of himself and Miss Hazeltine. To Uncle Ned, who was excluded from these simple pleasures, the excursion appeared hopeless from the first; and when a fresh perspective of darkness opened up, dimly contained between park palings on the one side and a hedge and ditch upon the other, the whole without the smallest signal of human habitation, the Squirradical drew up.

"This is a wild-goose chase," said he.

With the cessation of the footfalls, another sound smote upon their ears.

"Oh, what's that?" cried Julia.

"I can't think," said Gideon.

The Squirradical had his stick presented like a sword. "Gid," he began, "Gid, I——"

"Oh, Mr. Forsyth!" cried the girl. "Oh! don't go forward, you don't know what it might be—it might be something perfectly horrid."

"It may be the devil itself," said Gideon, disengaging himself, "but I am going to see it."

"Don't be rash, Gid," cried his uncle.

The barrister drew near to the sound, which was certainly of a portentous character. In quality, it appeared to blend the strains of the cow, the fog-horn, and the mosquito; and the startling manner of its enunciation added incalculably to its terrors. A dark object, not unlike the human form divine, appeared on the brink of the ditch.

"It's a man," said Gideon, "it's only a man; he seems to be asleep and snoring. Hullo," he added, a moment after, "there must be something wrong with him, he won't waken."

Gideon produced his vestas, struck one, and by its light recognised the tow-head of Harker.

"This is the man," said he, "as drunk as Belial. I see the whole story;" and to his two companions, who had now ventured to rejoin him, he set forth a theory of the divorce between the carrier and his cart, which was not unlike the truth.

"Drunken brute!" said Uncle Ned, "let's get him to a pump and give him what he deserves."

"Not at all!" said Gideon. "It is highly undesirable he should see us together; and really, do you know, I am very much obliged to him, for this is about the luckiest thing that could have possibly occurred. It seems to me — Uncle Ned, I declare to heaven it seems to me I'm clear of it!"

"Clear of what?" asked the Squirradical.

"The whole affair!" cried Gideon. "That man has been ass enough to steal the cart and the dead body; what he hopes to do with it, I neither know nor care. My hands are free, Jimson ceases; down with Jimson. Shake hands with me, Uncle Ned — Julia, darling girl, Julia, I ——"

"Gideon, Gideon!" said his uncle.

"Oh, it's all right, uncle, when we're going to be married so soon," said Gideon. "You know you said so yourself in the houseboat."

"Did I?" said Uncle Ned, "I am certain I said no such thing."

"Appeal to him, tell him he did, get on his soft side," cried Gideon. "He's a real brick if you get on his soft side."

"Dear Mr. Bloomfield," said Julia, "I know Gideon will be such a very good boy, and he has promised me to do such a lot of law, and I will see that he does too. And you know it is so very steadying to young men, everybody admits that; though, of course, I know I have no money, Mr. Bloomfield," she added.

"My dear young lady, as this rapscallion told you to-day on the boat, Uncle Ned has plenty," said the Squirradical, "and I can never forget that you have been shamefully defrauded. So as there's nobody looking, you had better give your Uncle Ned a kiss. There, you rogue," resumed Mr. Bloomfield, when the ceremony had been daintily performed, "this very pretty young lady is yours, and a vast deal more than you deserve. But now, let us get back to the houseboat, get up steam on the launch, and away back to town."

"That's the thing!" cried Gideon; "and to-morrow, there will be no houseboat, and no Jimson, and no carrier's cart, and no piano; and when Harker awakes on the ditch side, he may tell himself the whole affair has been a dream."

"Aha!" said Uncle Ned, "but there's another man who will have a different awakening. That fellow in the cart will find he has been too clever by half."

"Uncle Ned and Julia," said Gideon, "I am as happy as the King of Tartary, my heart is like a threepenny bit, my heels are like feathers; I am out of all my troubles, Julia's hand is in mine. Is this a time for anything but handsome sentiments? Why, there's not room in me for anything that's not angelic! And when I think of that poor unhappy devil in the cart, I stand here in the night and cry with a single heart—God help him!"

"Amen," said Uncle Ned.

CHAPTER XIII

THE TRIBULATIONS OF MORRIS: PART THE SECOND

In a really polite age of literature, I would have scorned to cast my eye again on the contortions of Morris. But the study is in the spirit of the day; it presents, besides, features of a high, almost a repulsive morality; and if it should prove the means of preventing any respectable and inexperienced gentleman from plunging light-heartedly into crime, even political crime, this work will not have been penned in vain.

He rose on the morrow of his night with Michael, rose from the leaden slumber of distress, to find his hand tremulous, his eyes closed with rheum, his throat parched, and his digestion obviously paralysed. "Lord knows it's not from eating!" Morris thought; and as he dressed he reconsidered his position under several heads. Nothing will so well depict the troubled seas in which he was now voyaging as a review of these various anxieties. I have thrown them (for the reader's convenience) into a certain order; but in the mind of one poor human equal, they whirled together like the dust of hurricanes. With the same obliging preoccupation, I have put a name to each of his distresses; and it will be observed with pity that every individual item would have graced and commended the cover of a railway novel.

Anxiety the First: *Where is the Body? or, the Mystery of Bent Pitman.* It was now manifestly plain that Bent Pitman (as was to be looked for from his ominous appellation) belonged to the darker order of the criminal class. An honest man would not have cashed the bill; a humane man would not have accepted in silence the tragic contents of the water-butt; a man, who was not already up to the hilts in gore, would have lacked the means of secretly disposing them. This process of reasoning left a horrid image of the monster, Pitman. Doubtless he had long ago disposed of the body—dropping it through a trap-door in his back kitchen, Morris supposed, with some hazy recollection of a picture in a penny dreadful; and doubtless the man now lived in wanton splendor on the proceeds of the bill. So far, all was peace. But with the profligate habits of a man like Bent Pitman (who was no doubt a hunchback in the bargain), eight hundred pounds could be easily melted in a week. When they were gone, what would he be likely to do next? A hell-like voice in Morris's own bosom gave the answer: "Blackmail me."

Anxiety the Second: *The Fraud of the Tontine; or, Is my Uncle Dead?* This, on which all Morris's hopes depended, was yet a question. He had tried to bully Teena; he had tried to bribe her; and nothing came of it. He had his moral conviction still; but you cannot blackmail a sharp lawyer on a moral conviction. And besides, since his interview with Michael, the idea wore a less attractive countenance. Was Michael the man to be blackmailed? and was Morris the man to do it? Grave considerations. "It's not that I am afraid of him," Morris so far condescended to reassure himself; "but I must be very certain of my ground, and the deuce of it is, I see no way. How unlike is life to novels! I wouldn't have even begun this business in a novel, but what I'd have met a dark, slouching fellow in the Oxford Road, who'd have become my accomplice, and known all about how to do it, and probably broken into Michael's house at night and found nothing but a wax-work image; and then blackmailed or murdered me. But here, in real life, I might walk the streets till I dropped dead, and none of the criminal classes would look near me. Though, to be sure, there is always Pitman," he added, thoughtfully.

Anxiety the Third: *The Cottage at Browndean; or, The Underpaid Accomplice.* For he had an accomplice, and that accomplice was blooming unseen in a damp cottage in Hampshire with empty pockets. What could be done about that? He really ought to have sent him something; if it was only a post-office order for five-bob, enough to prove that he was kept in mind, enough to keep him in hope, beer, and tobacco. "But what would you have?" thought Morris; and ruefully poured into his hand a half-crown, a florin, and eightpence in small change. For a man in Morris's position, at war with all society, and conducting, with the hand of inexperience, a widely ramified intrigue, the sum was already a derision. John would have to be doing; no mistake of that. "But then," asked the hell-like voice, "how long is John likely to stand it?"

Anxiety the Fourth: *The Leather Business; or, The Shutters at Last; a Tale of the City.* On this head, Morris had no news. He had not yet dared to visit the family concern; yet he knew he must delay no longer, and if anything had been wanted to sharpen this conviction, Michael's references of the night before rang ambiguously in his ear. Well and good. To visit the city might be indispensable; but what was he to do when he was there? He had no right to sign in his own name; and with all the will in the world, he seemed to lack the art of signing with his uncle's. Under these circumstances, Morris could do nothing to procrastinate the crash; and when it came, when prying eyes began to be applied to every joint of his behaviour, two questions could not fail to be addressed, sooner or later, to a speechless and perspiring insolvent. Where is Mr. Joseph Finsbury? and how about your visit to the bank? Questions, how easy to put! — ye gods, how impossible to answer! The man to whom they should be addressed went certainly to gaol, and — eh! what was this? — possibly to the gallows. Morris was trying to shave when this idea struck him, and he laid the razor down. Here (in Michael's words) was the total disappearance of a valuable uncle; here was a time of inexplicable conduct on the part of a nephew who had been in bad blood with the old man any time these seven years; what a chance for a judicial blunder! "But no," thought Morris, "they cannot, they dare not make it murder. Not that. But honestly, and speaking as a man to a man, I don't see any other crime in the calendar (except arson) that I don't seem somehow to have committed. And yet I'm a perfectly respectable man, and wished nothing but my due. Law is a pretty business."

With this conclusion firmly seated in his mind, Morris Finsbury descended to the hall of the house in John Street, still half shaven. There was a letter in the box; he knew the handwriting: John at last.

"Well, I think I might have been spared this," he said bitterly, and tore it open.

"Dear Morris," it ran, "what the dickens do you mean by it? I'm in an awful hole down here; I have to go on tick, and the parties on the spot don't cotton to the idea; they couldn't, because it is so plain I'm in a stait of Destitution. I've got no bed-clothes, think of that, I must have coins, the hole thing's a Mockry, I won't stand it, nobody would. I would have come away before, only I have no money for the railway fair. Don't be a lunatic, Morris, you don't seem to understand my dredful situation. I have to get the stamp on tick. A fact. Ever your affte. Brother, J. Finsbury."

"Can't even spell!" Morris reflected, as he crammed the letter in his pocket, and left the house. "What can I do for him? I have to go to the expense of a barber, I'm so shattered! How can I send anybody coins? It's hard lines, I dare say; but does he think I'm living on hot muffins? One comfort," was his grim reflection, "he can't cut and run: he's got to stay, he's as helpless as the dead." And then he broke forth again: "Complains, does he? and he's never even heard of Bent Pitman! If he had what I have on my mind, he might complain with a good grace."

But these were not honest arguments, or not wholly honest; there was a struggle in the mind of Morris; he could not disguise from himself that his brother John was miserably situated at Browndean, without news, without money, without bed-clothes, without society or any entertainment; and by the time he had been shaved and picked a hasty breakfast at a coffee-tavern, Morris had arrived at a compromise.

"Poor Johnnie," he said to himself, "he's in an awful box. I can't send him coins; but I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll send him the *Pink Un,* it'll cheer John up; and besides, it'll do his credit good getting anything by post."

Accordingly, on his way to the leather business, whither he proceeded (according to his thrifty habit) on foot, Morris purchased and despatched a single copy of that enlivening periodical, to which (in a sudden pang of remorse) he added at random the *Athenæum,* the *Revivalist,* and the *Penny Pictorial Weekly.* So there was John set up with literature, and Morris had laid balm upon his conscience.

As if to reward him, he was received in his place of business with good news. Orders were pouring in; there was a run on some of the back stock, and the figure had gone up; even the manager appeared elated. As for Morris, who had almost forgotten the meaning of good news, he longed to sob like a little child; he could have caught the manager (a pallid man with startled eyebrows) to his bosom; he could have found it in his generosity to give a check (for a small sum) to every clerk in the counting-house. As he sat and opened his letters, a chorus of airy vocalists sang in his brain, to most exquisite music, "This old concern may be profitable yet, profitable yet, profitable yet."

To him, in this sunny moment of relief, enter a Mr. Rodgerson, a creditor, but not one who was expected to be pressing, for his connection with the firm was old and regular.

"Oh, Finsbury," said he, not without embarrassment, "it's of course only fair to let you know — the fact is, money is a trifle tight — I have some paper out — for that matter, every one's complaining — and in short——"

"It has never been our habit, Rodgerson," said Morris, turning pale. "But give me time to turn round, and I'll see what I can do; I dare say we can let you have something on account."

"Well, that's just where it is," replied Rodgerson. "I was tempted, I've let the credit out of my hands."

"Out of your hands?" repeated Morris. "That's playing rather fast and loose with us, Mr. Rodgerson."

"Well, I got cent for cent for it," said the other, "on the nail, in a certified cheque."

"Cent for cent!" cried Morris. "Why, that's something like thirty per cent. bonus; a singular thing! Who's the party?"

"Don't know the man," was the reply. "Name of Moss."

"A Jew," Morris reflected, when his visitor was gone. And what could a Jew want with a claim of — he verified the amount in the books — a claim of three five eight, nineteen, ten, against the house of Finsbury? And why should he pay cent for cent? The figure proved the loyalty of Rodgerson, even Morris admitted that. But it proved unfortunately something else: the eagerness of Moss. The claim must have been wanted instantly, for that day, for that morning even. Why? The mystery of Moss promised to be a fit pendant to the mystery of Pitman. "And just when all was looking well, too!" cried Morris, smiting his hand upon the desk. And almost at the same moment, Mr. Moss was announced.

Mr. Moss was a radiant Hebrew, brutally handsome and offensively polite. He was acting (it appeared) for a third party; he understood nothing of the circumstances; his client desired to have his position regularised; but he would accept an antedated cheque—antedated by two months, if Mr. Finsbury chose.

"But I don't understand this," said Morris. "What made you pay cent per cent for it to-day?"

Mr. Moss had no idea; only his orders.

"The whole thing is thoroughly irregular," said Morris. "It is not the custom of the trade to settle at this time of the year. What are your instructions if I refuse?"

"I am to see Mr. Joseph Finsbury, the head of the firm," said Mr. Moss. "I was directed to insist on that; it was implied you had no status here — the expressions are not mine."

"You cannot see Mr. Joseph; he is unwell," said Morris.

"In that case I was to place the matter in the hands of a lawyer — let me see —" said Mr. Moss, opening a pocketbook, with perhaps suspicious care, at the right place — "Yes — of Mr. Michael Finsbury. A relation, perhaps? In that case, I presume, the matter will be pleasantly arranged."

To pass into the hands of Michael was too much for Morris; he struck his colours: a cheque at two months was nothing, after all. In two months he would probably be dead, or in a gaol at any rate. He bade the manager give Mr. Moss a chair and the paper. "I'm going over to get a cheque signed by Mr. Finsbury," said he, "who is lying ill at John Street."

A cab there and a cab back, here were inroads on his wretched capital! He counted the cost; when he was done with Mr. Moss, he would be left with twelve-pence half-penny in the world. What was even worse, he had now been forced to bring his uncle up to Bloomsbury. "No use for poor Johnnie in Hampshire now," he reflected. "And how the farce is to be kept up completely passes me. At Browndean it was just possible; in Bloomsbury it seems beyond human ingenuity—though I suppose it's what Michael does. But then he has accomplices, that Scotchman and the whole gang. Ah, if I had accomplices!"

Necessity is the mother of the arts; under a spur so immediate Morris surprised himself by the neatness and despatch of his new forgery; and within three-fourths of an hour had handed it to Mr. Moss.

"That is very satisfactory," observed that gentleman, rising. "I was to tell you it will not be presented, but you had better take care."

The room swam round Morris. "What—what's that!" he cried, grasping the table; he was miserably conscious, the next moment, of his shrill tongue and ashen face. "What do you mean—it will not be presented? Why am I to take care? What is all this mummery?"

"I have no idea, Mr. Finsbury," replied the smiling Hebrew. "It was a message I was to deliver; the expressions were put into my mouth."

"What is your client's name?" asked Morris.

"That is a secret for the moment," answered Mr. Moss.

Morris bent toward him. "It's not the bank?" he asked, hoarsely.

"I have no authority to say more, Mr. Finsbury," returned Mr. Moss. "I will wish you a good-morning, if you please."

"Wish me a good-morning!" thought Morris; and the next moment, seizing his hat, he fled from his place of business like a madman. Three streets away he stopped and groaned. "Lord! I should have borrowed from the manager!" he cried. "But it's too late now; it would look dicky to go back; I'm penniless — simply penniless — like the unemployed."

He went home and sat in the dismantled dining-room with his head in his hands. Newton never thought harder than this victim of circumstance, and yet no clearness came. "It may be a defect in my intelligence," he cried, rising to his feet, "but I cannot see that I am fairly used. The bad luck I've had is a thing to write to *The Times* about; it's enough to breed a revolution. And the plain English of the whole thing is that I must have money at once. I'm done with all morality now; I'm long past that stage; money I must have, and the only chance I see is Bent Pitman. Bent Pitman is a criminal, and therefore his position's weak. He must have some of that eight hundred left; if he has I'll force him to go shares; and even if he hasn't, I'll tell him the tontine affair, and with a desperate man like Pitman at my back, it'll be strange if I don't succeed."

Well and good. But how to lay hands upon Bent Pitman, except by advertisement, was not so clear.

And even so, in what terms to ask a meeting? on what grounds? and where? Not at John Street, for it would never do to let a man like Bent Pitman know your real address; nor yet at Pitman's house, some dreadful place in Holloway, with a trap-door in the back kitchen; a house which you might enter in a light summer overcoat and varnished boots, to come forth again piecemeal in a market-basket. That was the drawback of a really efficient accomplice, Morris felt, not without a shudder. "I never dreamed I should come to actually covet such society," he thought. And then a brilliant idea struck him. Waterloo Station, a public place, yet at certain hours of the day a solitary; a place, besides, the very name of which must knock upon the heart of Pitman, and at once suggest a knowledge of the latest of his guilty secrets. Morris took a piece of paper and sketched his advertisement.

"WILLIAM BENT PITMAN, if this should meet the eye of, he will hear of SOMETHING TO HIS ADVANTAGE at the far end of the main line departure platform, Waterloo Station, 2 to 4 P.M., Sunday next."

Morris reperused this literary trifle with approbation. "Terse," he reflected. "Something to his advantage is not strictly true; but it's taking and original, and a man is not on oath in an advertisement. All that I require now is the ready cash for my own meals and for the advertisement, and — no, I can't lavish money upon John, but I'll give him some more papers. How to raise the wind?"

He approached his cabinet of signets, and the collector suddenly revolted in his blood. "I will not!" he cried, "nothing shall induce me to massacre my collection —

rather theft!" And dashing upstairs to the drawing-room, he helped himself to a few of his uncle's curiosities: a pair of Turkish babooshes, a Smyrna fan, a water-cooler, a musket guaranteed to have been seized from an Ephesian bandit, and a pocketful of curious but incomplete sea-shells.

CHAPTER XIV

WILLIAM BENT PITMAN HEARS OF SOMETHING TO HIS ADVANTAGE

On the morning of Sunday, William Dent Pitman rose at his usual hour, although with something more than the usual reluctance. The day before (it should be explained) an addition had been made to his family in the person of a lodger. Michael Finsbury had acted sponsor in the business, and guaranteed the weekly bill; on the other hand, no doubt with a spice of his prevailing jocularity, he had drawn a depressing portrait of the lodger's character. Mr. Pitman had been led to understand his guest was not good company; he had approached the gentleman with fear, and had rejoiced to find himself the entertainer of an angel. At tea he had been vastly pleased; till hard on one in the morning he had sat entranced by eloquence and progressively fortified with information in the studio; and now, as he reviewed over his toilet the harmless pleasures of the evening, the future smiled upon him with revived attractions. "Mr. Finsbury is, indeed, an acquisition," he remarked to himself; and as he entered the little parlour, where the table was already laid for breakfast, the cordiality of his greeting would have befitted an acquaintanceship already old.

"I am delighted to see you, sir"—these were his expressions—"and I trust you have slept well."

"Accustomed as I have been for so long to a life of almost perpetual change," replied the guest, "the disturbance so often complained of by the more sedentary, as attending their first night in (what is called) a new bed is a complaint from which I am entirely free."

"I am delighted to hear it," said the drawing-master warmly. "But I see I have interrupted you over the paper."

"The Sunday paper is one of the features of the age," said Mr. Finsbury. "In America, I am told, it supersedes all other literature, the bone and sinew of the nation finding their requirements catered for; hundreds of columns will be occupied with interesting details of the world's doings, such as water-spouts, elopements, conflagrations, and public entertainments; there is a corner for politics, ladies' work, chess, religion, and even literature; and a few spicy editorials serve to direct the course of public thought. It is difficult to estimate the part played by such enormous and miscellaneous repositories in the education of the people. But this (though interesting in itself) partakes of the nature of a digression; and what I was about to ask you was this: Are you yourself a student of the daily press?"

"There is not much in the papers to interest an artist," returned Pitman.

"In that case," resumed Joseph, "an advertisement which has appeared the last two days in various journals, and reappears this morning, may possibly have failed to catch your eye. The name, with a trifling variation, bears a strong resemblance to your own. Ah, here it is. If you please, I will read it to you.

"'WILLIAM BENT PITMAN, if this should meet the eye of, he will hear of SOMETHING TO HIS ADVANTAGE at the far end of the main line departure platform, Waterloo Station, 2 to 4 P. M. to-day.' "

"Is that in print?" cried Pitman. "Let me see it! Bent? It must be Dent! *Something to my advantage?* Mr. Finsbury, excuse me offering a word of caution; I am aware how strangely this must sound in your ears, but there are domestic reasons why this little circumstance might perhaps be better kept between ourselves. Mrs. Pitman — my dear sir, I assure you there is nothing dishonourable in my secrecy; the reasons are domestic, merely domestic; and I may set your conscience at rest when I assure you all the circumstances are known to our common friend, your excellent nephew, Mr. Michael, who has not withdrawn from me his esteem."

"A word is enough, Mr. Pitman," said Joseph, with one of his oriental reverences.

Half an hour later, the drawing-master found Michael in bed and reading a book, the picture of good-humour and repose.

"Hillo, Pitman," he said, laying down his book, "what brings you here at this inclement hour? Ought to be in church, my boy!"

"I have little thought of church to-day, Mr. Finsbury," said the drawing-master. "I am on the brink of something new, sir." And he presented the advertisement.

"Why, what is this?" cried Michael, sitting suddenly up. He studied it for half a minute with a frown. "Pitman, I don't care about this document a particle," said he.

"It will have to be attended to, however," said Pitman.

"I thought you'd had enough of Waterloo," returned the lawyer. "Have you started a morbid craving? You've never been yourself anyway since you lost that beard. I believe now it was where you kept your senses."

"Mr. Finsbury," said the drawing-master, "I have tried to reason this matter out, and, with your permission, I should like to lay before you the results."

"Fire away," said Michael; "but please, Pitman, remember it's Sunday, and let's have no bad language."

"There are three views open to us," began Pitman. "First, this may be connected with the barrel; second, it may be connected with Mr. Semitopolis' statue; and third, it may be from my wife's brother, who went to Australia. In the first case, which is of course possible, I confess the matter would be best allowed to drop."

"The court is with you there, Brother Pitman," said Michael.

"In the second," continued the other, "it is plainly my duty to leave no stone unturned for the recovery of the lost antique."

"My dear fellow, Semitopolis has come down like a trump; he has pocketed the loss and left you the profit. What more would you have?" inquired the lawyer.

"I conceive, sir, under correction, that Mr. Semitopolis' generosity binds me to even greater exertion," said the drawing-master. "The whole business was unfortunate; it was—I need not disguise it from you—it was illegal from the first: the more reason that I should try to behave like a gentleman," concluded Pitman, flushing.

"I have nothing to say to that," returned the lawyer.

"I have sometimes thought I should like to try to behave like a gentleman myself; only it's such a one-sided business, with the world and the legal profession as they are."

"Then, in the third," resumed the drawing-master, "if it's Uncle Tim, of course, our fortune's made."

"It's not Uncle Tim, though," said the lawyer.

"Have you observed that very remarkable expression: *Something to his advantage?*" inquired Pitman, shrewdly.

"You innocent mutton," said Michael, "it's the seediest commonplace in the English language, and only proves the advertiser is an ass. Let me demolish your house of cards for you at once. Would Uncle Tim make that blunder in your name? — in itself, the blunder is delicious, a huge improvement on the gross reality, and I mean to adopt it in the future; but is it like Uncle Tim?"

"No, it's not like him," Pitman admitted. "But his mind may have become unhinged at Ballarat."

"If you come to that, Pitman," said Michael, "the advertiser *may* be Queen Victoria, fired with the desire to make a duke of you. I put it to yourself if that's probable; and yet it's not against the laws of nature. But we sit here to consider probabilities; and with your genteel permission, I eliminate her Majesty and Uncle Tim on the threshold. To proceed, we have your second idea, that this has some connection with the statue. Possible; but in that case who is the advertiser? Not Ricardi, for he knows your address; not the person who got the box, for he doesn't know your name. The vanman, I hear you suggest, in a lucid interval. He might have got your name, and got it incorrectly, at the station; and he might have failed to get your address. I grant the van-man. But a question: Do you really wish to meet the van-man?"

"Why should I not?" asked Pitman.

"If he wants to meet you," replied Michael, "observe this: It is because he has found his address-book, has been to the house that got the statue, and — mark my words! — is moving at the instigation of the murderer."

"I should be very sorry to think so," said Pitman; "but I still consider it my duty to Mr. Semitopolis . . ."

"Pitman," interrupted Michael, "this will not do. Don't seek to impose on your legal adviser; don't try to pass yourself off for the Duke of Wellington, for that is not your line. Come, I wager a dinner I can read your thoughts. You still believe it's Uncle Tim."

"Mr. Finsbury," said the drawing-master, colouring, "you are not a man in narrow circumstances, and you have no family. Guendolen is growing up, a very promising girl — she was confirmed this year; and I think you will be able to enter into my feelings as a parent, when I tell you she is quite ignorant of dancing. The boys are at the board-school, which is all very well in its way; at least, I am the last man in the world to criticise the institutions of my native land. But I had fondly hoped that Harold might become a professional musician; and little Otho shows a quite remarkable vocation for the Church. I am not exactly an ambitious man . . ."

"Well, well," interrupted Michael. "Be explicit; you think it's Uncle Tim."

"It might be Uncle Tim," insisted Pitman, "and if it were, and I neglected the occasion, how could I ever look my children in the face? I do not refer to Mrs. Pitman . . ."

"No, you never do," said Michael.

". . . but in the case of her own brother returning from Ballarat . . ." continued Pitman.

". . . with his mind unhinged," put in the lawyer.

". . . returning from Ballarat with a large fortune, her impatience may be more easily imagined than described," concluded Pitman.

"All right," said Michael, "be it so. And what do you propose to do?"

"I am going to Waterloo," said Pitman, "in disguise."

"All by your little self?" inquired the lawyer. "Well, I hope you think it safe. Mind and send me word from the police cells."

"Oh, Mr. Finsbury, I had ventured to hope—perhaps you might be induced to—to make one of us," faltered Pitman.

"Disguise myself on Sunday?" cried Michael. "How little you understand my principles!"

"Mr. Finsbury, I have no means of showing you my gratitude; but let me ask you one question," said Pitman. "If I were a very rich client, would you not take the risk?"

"Diamond, Diamond, you know not what you do!" cried Michael. "Why, man, do you suppose I make a practice of cutting about London with my clients in disguise? Do you suppose money would induce me to touch this business with a stick? I give you my word of honor, it would not. But I own I have a real curiosity to see how you conduct this interview — that tempts me; it tempts me, Pitman, more than gold — it should be exquisitely rich." And suddenly Michael laughed. "Well, Pitman," said he, "have all the truck ready in the studio. I'll go."

About twenty minutes after two, on this eventful day, the vast and gloomy shed of Waterloo lay, like the temple of a dead religion, silent and deserted. Here and there, at one of the platforms, a train lay becalmed; here and there a wandering footfall echoed; the cab-horses outside stamped with startling reverberations on the stones: or from the neighbouring wilderness of railway an engine snorted forth a whistle. The main line departure platform slumbered like the rest; the booking-hutches closed; the backs of Mr. Haggard's novels, with which upon a week-day the book-stall shines emblazoned, discreetly hidden behind dingy shutters; the rare officials, undisguisedly somnambulant; and the customary loiterers, even to the middle-aged woman with the ulster and the handbag, fled to more congenial scenes. As in the inmost dells of some small tropic island the throbbing of the ocean lingers, so here a faint pervading hum and trepidation told in every corner of surrounding London.

At the hour already named, persons acquainted with John Dickson, of Ballarat, and Ezra Thomas, of the United States of America, would have been cheered to behold them enter through the booking-office.

"What names are we to take?" inquired the latter, anxiously adjusting the window-glass spectacles which he had been suffered on this occasion to assume.

"There's no choice for you, my boy," returned Michael. "Bent Pitman or nothing. As for me, I think I look as if I might be called Appleby; something agreeably old-world about Appleby — breathes of Devonshire cider. Talking of which, suppose you wet your whistle? the interview is likely to be trying."

"I think I'll wait till afterward," returned Pitman, "on the whole, I think I'll wait till the thing's over. I don't know if it strikes you as it does me; but the place seems deserted and silent, Mr. Finsbury, and filled with very singular echoes."

"Kind of Jack-in-the-box feeling?" inquired Michael, "as if all these empty trains might be filled with policemen waiting for a signal? and Sir Charles Warren perched among the girders with a silver whistle to his lips? It's guilt, Pitman."

In this uneasy frame of mind they walked nearly the whole length of the departure platform, and at the western extremity became aware of a slender figure standing backed against a pillar. The figure was plainly sunk into a deep abstraction; he was not aware of their approach, but gazed far abroad over the sunlit station. Michael stopped.

"Holloa!" said he, "can that be your advertiser? If so, I'm done with it." And then, on second thoughts: "Not so, either," he resumed, more cheerfully. "Here, turn your back a moment. So. Give me the specs."

"But you agreed I was to have them," protested Pitman.

"Ah, but that man knows me," said Michael.

"Does he? what's his name?" cried Pitman.

"Oh, he took me into his confidence," returned the lawyer. "But I may say one thing: If he's your advertiser (and he may be, for he seems to have been seized with criminal lunacy) you can go ahead with a clear conscience, for I hold him in the hollow of my hand."

The change effected, and Pitman comforted with this good news, the pair drew near to Morris.

"Are you looking for Mr. William Bent Pitman?" inquired the drawing-master. "I am he."

Morris raised his head. He saw before him, in the speaker, a person of almost indescribable insignificance, in white spats and a shirt cut indecently low. A little behind a second and more burly figure offered little to criticism, except ulster, whiskers, spectacles, and deerstalker hat. Since he had decided to call up devils from the underworld of London, Morris had pondered deeply on the probabilities of their appearance. His first emotion, like that of Charoba when she beheld the sea, was one of disappointment; his second did more justice to the case. Never before had he seen a couple dressed like these; he had struck a new stratum.

"I must speak with you alone," said he.

"You need not mind Mr. Appleby," returned Pitman. "He knows all."

"All? Do you know what I am here to speak of?" inquired Morris. "The barrel."

Pitman turned pale, but it was with manly indignation. "You are the man!" he cried. "You very wicked person!"

"Am I to speak before him?" asked Morris, disregarding these severe expressions.

"He has been present throughout," said Pitman. "He opened the barrel; your guilty secret is already known to him, as well as to your Maker and myself."

"Well, then," said Morris, "what have you done with the money?"

"I know nothing about any money," said Pitman.

"You needn't try that on," said Morris. "I have tracked you down; you came to the station sacrilegiously disguised as a clergyman, procured my barrel, opened it, rifled the body, and cashed the bill. I have been to the bank, I tell you! I have followed you step by step, and your denials are childish and absurd."

"Come, come, Morris, keep your temper," said Mr. Appleby.

"Michael!" cried Morris, "Michael here too!"

"Here too," echoed the lawyer, "here and everywhere, my good fellow; every step you take is counted; trained detectives follow you like your shadow; they report to me every three-quarters of an hour; no expense is spared."

Morris's face took on a hue of dirty gray. "Well, I don't care; I have the less reserve to keep," he cried. "That man cashed my bill; it's a theft, and I want the money back."

"Do you think I would lie to you, Morris?" asked Michael.

"I don't know," said his cousin. "I want my money."

"It was I alone who touched the body," began Michael.

"You? Michael!" cried Morris, starting back. "Then why haven't you declared the death?"

"What the devil do you mean?" asked Michael.

"Am I mad? or are you?" cried Morris.

"I think it must be Pitman," said Michael.

The three men stared at each other, wild-eyed.

"This is dreadful," said Morris, "dreadful. I do not understand one word that is addressed to me."

"I give you my word of honor, no more do I," said Michael.

"And in God's name, why whiskers?" cried Morris, pointing in a ghastly manner at his cousin. "Does my brain reel? How whiskers?"

"Oh, that's a matter of detail," said Michael.

There was another silence, during which Morris appeared to himself to be shot in a trapeze as high as St. Paul's, and as low as Baker Street Station.

"Let us recapitulate," said Michael, "unless it's really a dream, in which case I wish Teena would call me for breakfast. My friend Pitman, here, received a barrel which, it now appears, was meant for you. The barrel contained the body of a man. How or why you killed him . . ."

"I never laid a hand on him," protested Morris. "This is what I have dreaded all along. But think, Michael! I'm not that kind of man; with all my faults, I wouldn't touch a hair of anybody's head, and it was all dead loss to me. He got killed in that vile accident."

Suddenly Michael was seized by mirth so prolonged and excessive that his companions supposed beyond a doubt his reason had deserted him. Again and again he struggled to compose himself, and again and again laughter overwhelmed him like a tide. In all this maddening interview there had been no more spectral feature than this of Michael's merriment; and Pitman and Morris, drawn together by the common fear, exchanged glances of anxiety.

"Morris," gasped the lawyer, when he was at last able to articulate, "hold on, I see it all now. I can make it all clear in one word. Here's the key: *I never guessed it was Uncle Joseph till this moment.*"

This remark produced an instant lightening of the tension for Morris; for Pitman, it quenched the last ray of hope and daylight. Uncle Joseph, whom he had left an hour ago in Norfolk Street, pasting newspaper cuttings?—it?—the dead body?—then who was he, Pitman? and was this Waterloo Station or Colney Hatch?

"To be sure!" cried Morris; "it was badly smashed, I know. How stupid not to think of that. Why, then, all's clear; and, my dear Michael, I'll tell you what—we're saved, both saved. You get the tontine—I don't grudge it you the least—and I get the leather business, which is really beginning to look up. Declare the death at once, don't mind me in the smallest, don't consider me; declare the death, and we're all right."

"Ah, but I can't declare it," said Michael.

"Why not?" cried Morris.

"I can't produce the corpus, Morris. I've lost it," said the lawyer.

"Stop a bit," ejaculated the leather merchant. "How is this? It's not possible. I lost it."

"Well, I've lost it too, my son," said Michael, with extreme serenity. "Not recognising it, you see, and suspecting something irregular in its origin, I got rid of—what shall we say?—got rid of the proceeds at once."

"You got rid of the body? What made you do that?" wailed Morris. "But you can get it again? You know where it is?"

"I wish I did, Morris, and you may believe me there, for it would be a small sum in my pocket; but the fact is, I don't," said Michael.

"Good Lord," said Morris, addressing heaven and earth, "good Lord, I've lost the leather business."

Michael was once more shaken with laughter.

"Why do you laugh, you fool?" cried his cousin, "you lose more than I. You've bungled it worse than even I did. If you had a spark of feeling, you would be shaking in your boots with vexation. But I'll tell you one thing — I'll have that eight hundred pound — I'll have that and go to Swan River — that's mine, anyway, and your friend must have forged to cash it. Give me the eight hundred, here, upon this platform, or I go straight to Scotland Yard and turn the whole disreputable story inside out."

"Morris," said Michael, laying his hand upon his shoulder, "hear reason. It wasn't us, it was the other man. We never even searched the body."

"The other man?" repeated Morris.

"Yes, the other man. We palmed Uncle Joseph off upon another man," said Michael.

"You what? You palmed him off? That's surely a singular expression," said Morris.

"Yes, palmed him off for a piano," said Michael, with perfect simplicity. "Remarkably full, rich tone," he added.

Morris carried his hand to his brow and looked at it; it was wet with sweat. "Fever," said he.

"No, it was a Broadwood grand," said Michael. "Pitman here will tell you if it was genuine or not."

"Eh? Oh! Oh, yes, I believe it was a genuine Broadwood; I have played upon it several times myself," said Pitman. "The three-letter E was broken."

"Don't say anything more about pianos," said Morris, with a strong shudder; "I'm not the man I used to be! This — this other man — let's come to him, if I can only manage to follow. Who is he? Where can I get hold of him?"

"Ah, that's the rub," said Michael. "He's been in possession of the desired article, let me see — since Wednesday, about four o'clock, and is now, I should imagine, on his way to the isles of Javan and Godire."

"Michael," said Morris, pleadingly, "I am in a very weak state, and I beg your consideration for a kinsman. Say it slowly again, and be sure you are correct. When did he get it?"

Michael repeated his statement.

"Yes, that's the worst thing yet," said Morris, drawing in his breath.

"What is?" asked the lawyer.

"Even the dates are sheer nonsense," said the leather merchant. "The bill was cashed on Tuesday. There's not a gleam of reason in the whole transaction."

A young gentleman, who had passed the trio and suddenly started and turned back, at this moment laid a heavy hand on Michael's shoulder.

"Aha, so this is Mr. Dickson?" said he.

The trump of judgment could scarce have rung with a more dreadful note in the ears of Pitman and the lawyer. To Morris this erroneous name seemed a legitimate enough continuation of the nightmare in which he had so long been wandering. And when Michael, with his brand-new bushy whiskers, broke from the grasp of the stranger and turned to run, and the weird little shaven creature in the low-necked shirt followed his example with a bird-like screech, and the stranger (finding the rest of his prey escape him) pounced with a rude grasp on Morris himself, that gentleman's frame of mind might be very nearly expressed in the colloquial phrase: "I told you so!"

"I have one of the gang," said Gideon Forsyth.

"I do not understand," said Morris, dully.

"Oh, I will make you understand," returned Gideon, grimly.

"You will be a good friend to me if you can make me understand anything," cried Morris, with a sudden energy of conviction.

"I don't know you personally, do I?" continued Gideon, examining his unresisting prisoner. "Never mind, I know your friends. They are your friends, are they not?"

"I do not understand you," said Morris.

"You had possibly something to do with a piano?" suggested Gideon.

"A piano!" cried Morris, convulsively clasping Gideon by the arm. "Then you're the other man! Where is it? Where is the body? And did you cash the draft?"

"Where is the body? This is very strange," mused Gideon. "Do you want the body?"

"Want it?" cried Morris. "My whole fortune depends upon it! I lost it. Where is it? Take me to it!"

"Oh, you want it, do you? And the other man, Dickson — does he want it?" inquired Gideon.

"Who do you mean by Dickson? Oh, Michael Finsbury! Why, of course he does! He lost it too. If he had it he'd have won the tontine to-morrow."

"Michael Finsbury! Not the solicitor?" cried Gideon.

"Yes, the solicitor," said Morris. "But where is the body?"

"Then that is why he sent the brief! What is Mr. Finsbury's private address?" asked Gideon.

"233 King's Road. What brief? Where are you going? Where is the body?" cried Morris, clinging to Gideon's arm.

"I have lost it myself," returned Gideon, and ran out of the station.

CHAPTER XV

THE RETURN OF THE GREAT VANCE

MORRIS returned from Waterloo in a frame of mind that baffles description. He was a modest man; he had never conceived an overweening notion of his own powers; he knew himself unfit to write a book, turn a table napkin-ring, entertain a Christmas party with legerdemain — grapple (in short) any of those conspicuous accomplishments that are usually classed under the head of genius. He knew — he admitted — his parts to be pedestrian, but he had considered them (until quite lately) fully equal to the demands of life. And to-day he owned himself defeated: life had the upper hand; if there had been any means of flight or place to flee to, if the world had been so ordered that a man could leave it like a place of entertainment, Morris would have instantly resigned all further claim on its rewards and pleasures, and, with inexpressible contentment, ceased to be. As it was, one aim shone before him: he could get home. Even as the sick dog crawls under the sofa, Morris could shut the door of John Street and be alone.

The dusk was falling when he drew near this place of refuge; and the first thing that met his eyes was the figure of a man upon the step, alternately plucking at the bell-handle and pounding on the panels. The man had no hat, his clothes were hideous with filth, he had the air of a hop-picker. Yet Morris knew him; it was John.

The first impulse of flight was succeeded, in the elder brother's bosom, by the empty quiescence of despair. "What does it matter now?" he thought, and drawing forth his latch-key ascended the steps.

John turned about; his face was ghastly with weariness, and dirt and fury; and as he recognised the head of his family, he drew in a long rasping breath, and his eyes glittered.

"Open that door," he said, standing back.

"I am going to," said Morris, and added, mentally, "he looks like murder!"

The brothers passed into the hall, the door closed behind them; and suddenly John seized Morris by the shoulders and shook him as a terrier shakes a rat. "You mangy little cad," he said, "I'd serve you right to smash your skull!" And shook him again, so that his teeth rattled and his head smote upon the wall.

"Don't be violent, Johnny," said Morris. "It can't do any good now."

"Shut your mouth," said John, "your time's come to listen."

He strode into the dining-room, fell into the easy-chair, and taking off one of his burst walking-shoes, nursed for a while his foot like one in agony. "I'm lame for life," he said. "What is there for dinner?"

"Nothing, Johnny," said Morris.

"Nothing? What do you mean by that?" inquired the Great Vance. "Don't set up your chat to me!"

"I mean simply nothing," said his brother. "I have nothing to eat, and nothing to buy it with. I've only had a cup of tea and a sandwich all this day myself."

"Only a sandwich?" sneered Vance. "I suppose *you*'re going to complain next. But you had better take care: I've had all I mean to take; and I can tell you what it is, I mean to dine and to dine well. Take your signets and sell them."

"I can't to-day," objected Morris, "it's Sunday."

"I tell you I'm going to dine!" cried the younger brother.

"But if it's not possible, Johnny?" pleaded the other.

"You nincompoop!" cried Vance. "Ain't we householders? Don't they know us at that hotel where Uncle Parker used to come? Be off with you; and if you ain't back in half an hour, and if the dinner ain't good, first I'll lick you till you don't want to breathe, and then I'll go straight to the police and blow the gaff. Do you understand that, Morris Finsbury? Because if you do you had better jump."

The idea smiled even upon the wretched Morris, who was sick with famine. He sped upon his errand, and returned to find John still nursing his foot in the armchair.

"What would you like to drink, Johnny?" he inquired, soothingly.

"Fizz," said John. "Some of the poppy stuff from the end bin; a bottle of the old port that Michael liked, to follow; and see and don't shake the port. And look here, light the fire—and the gas, and draw down the blinds; it's cold and it's getting dark. And then you can lay the cloth. And, I say—here, you! bring me down some clothes."

The room looked comparatively habitable by the time the dinner came; and the dinner itself was good: strong gravy soup, filets of sole, mutton chops and tomato sauce, roast beef done rare with roast potatoes, cabinet pudding, a piece of Chester cheese, and some early celery: a meal uncompromisingly British, but supporting.

"Thank God!" said John, his nostrils sniffing wide, surprised by joy into the unwonted formality of grace. "Now I'm going to take this chair with my back to the fire—there's been a strong frost these two last nights, and I can't get it out of my bones; the celery will be just the ticket—I'm going to sit here, and you are going to stand there, Morris Finsbury, and play butler."

"But, Johnny, I'm so hungry myself," pleaded Morris.

"You can have what I leave," said Vance. "You're just beginning to pay your score, my daisy; I owe you one pound ten; don't you rouse the British lion!" There was something indescribably menacing in the face and voice of the Great Vance as he uttered these words, at which the soul of Morris withered. "There!" resumed the feaster, "give us a glass of the fizz to start with. Gravy soup! And I thought I didn't like gravy soup! Do you know how I got here?" he asked, with another explosion of wrath.

"No, Johnny, how could I?" said the obsequious Morris.

"I walked on my ten toes!" cried John; "tramped the whole way from Browndean; and begged! I would like to see you beg. It's not so easy as you might suppose. I played it on being a shipwrecked mariner from

Blyth; I don't know where Blyth is, do you? but I thought it sounded natural. I begged from a little beast of a school-boy, and he forked out a bit of twine, and asked me to make a clove-hitch; I did, too, I know I did, but he said it wasn't, he said it was a granny's knot, and I was a what d'ye call em, and he would give me in charge. Then I begged from a naval officer — he never bothered me with knots, but he only gave me a tract; there's a nice account of the British navy! — and then from a widow woman that sold lollipops, and I got a hunch of bread from her. Another party I fell in with said you could generally always get bread; and the thing to do was to break a plate-glass window and get into gaol; seemed rather a brilliant scheme. Pass the beef."

"Why didn't you stay at Browndean?" Morris ventured to inquire.

"Skittles!" said John. "On what? The *Pink Un* and a measly religious paper? I had to leave Browndean; I had to, I tell you. I got tick at a public, and set up to be the Great Vance; so would you, if you were leading such a beastly existence! And a card stood me a lot of ale and stuff, and we got swipey, talking about music-halls and the piles of tin I got for singing; and then they got me on to sing 'Around her splendid form I weaved the magic circle,' and then he said I couldn't be Vance, and I stuck to it like grim death I was. It was rot of me to sing, of course, but I thought I could brazen it out with a set of yokels. It settled my hash at the public," said John, with a sigh. "And then the last thing was the carpenter ——"

"Our landlord?" inquired Morris.

"That's the party," said John. "He came nosing about the place, and then wanted to know where the water-butt was, and the bed-clothes. I told him to go to the devil; so would you too, when there was no possible thing to say! And then he said I had pawned them, and did I know it was felony? Then I made a pretty neat stroke. I remembered he was deaf, and talked a whole lot of rot, very politely, just so low he couldn't hear a word. 'I don't hear you,' says he. 'I know you don't, my buck, and I don't mean you to,' says I, smiling away like a haberdasher. 'I'm hard of hearing,' he roars. 'I'd be in a pretty hot corner if you weren't,' says I, making signs as if I was explaining everything. It was tip-top as long as it lasted. 'Well,' he said, 'I'm deaf, worse luck, but I bet the constable can hear you.' And off he started one way, and I the other. They got a spirit-lamp, and the *Pink Un,* and that old religious paper, and another periodical you sent me. I think you must have been drunk — it had a name like one of those spots that Uncle Joseph used to hold forth at, and it was all full of the most awful swipes about poetry and the use of the globes. It was the kind of thing that nobody could read out of a lunatic asylum. The *Athæneum*, that was the name! Golly, what a paper!"

"*Athenæum,* you mean," said Morris.

"I don't care what you call it," said John, "so as I don't require to take it in! There, I feel better. Now I'm going to sit by the fire in the easy chair; pass me the cheese, and the celery, and the bottle of port — no, a champagne glass, it holds more. And now you can pitch in, there's some of the fish left, and a chop, and some fizz. Ah," sighed the refreshed pedestrian, "Michael was right about that port; there's old and vatted for you! Michael's a man I like; he's clever and reads books, and the *Athæneum,* and all that; but he's not dreary to meet, he don't talk *Athæneum* like the other parties; why, the most of them would throw a blight over a skittle alley! Talking of Michael, I ain't bored myself to put the question, because of course I knew it from the first. You've made a hash of it, eh?"

"Michael made a hash of it," said Morris, flushing dark.

"What have we got to do with that?" inquired John.

"He has lost the body, that's what we have to do with it," cried Morris. "He has lost the body, and the death can't be established."

"Hold on," said John. "I thought you didn't want to?"

"Oh, we're far past that," said his brother. "It's not the tontine now, it's the leather business, Johnny; it's the clothes upon our back."

"Stow the slow music," said John, "and tell your story from beginning to end."

Morris did as he was bid.

"Well, now, what did I tell you?" cried the Great Vance, when the other had done. "But I know one thing; I'm not going to be humbugged out of my property."

"I should like to know what you mean to do," said Morris.

"I'll tell you that," responded John, with extreme decision. "I'm going to put my interests in the hands of the smartest lawyer in London; and whether you go to quod or not is a matter of indifference to me."

"Why, Johnny, we're in the same boat!" expostulated Morris.

"Are we?" cried his brother. "I bet we're not! Have I committed forgery? have I lied about Uncle Joseph? have I put idiotic advertisements in the comic papers? have I smashed other people's statues? I like your cheek, Morris Finsbury. No, I've let you run my affairs too long; now they shall go to Michael. I like Michael, anyway; and it's time I understood my situation."

At this moment the brethren were interrupted by a ring at the bell, and Morris going timorously to the door, received from the hands of a commissionnaire a letter addressed in the hand of Michael. Its contents ran as follows:

> "MORRIS FINSBURY, if this should meet the eye of, he will hear of SOMETHING TO HIS ADVANTAGE at my office, in Chancery Lane, at 10 A.M. to-morrow.
>
> "MICHAEL FINSBURY."

So utter was Morris's subjection that he did not wait to be asked, but handed the note to John as soon as he had glanced at it himself.

"That's the way to write a letter," cried John. "Nobody but Michael could have written that."

And Morris did not even claim the credit of priority.

CHAPTER XVI

FINAL ADJUSTMENT OF THE LEATHER BUSINESS

FINSBURY brothers were ushered, at ten the next morning, into a large apartment in Michael's office; the Great Vance, somewhat restored from yesterday's exhaustion, but with one foot in a slipper; Morris, not positively damaged, but a man ten years older than he who had left Bournemouth eight days before, his face ploughed full of anxious wrinkles, his dark hair liberally grizzled at the temples.

Three persons were seated at a table to receive them: Michael in the midst, Gideon Forsyth at his right hand, on his left an ancient gentleman with spectacles and silver hair.

"By Jings, it's Uncle Joe!" cried John.

But Morris approached his uncle with a pale countenance and glittering eyes.

"I'll tell you what you did!" he cried. "You absconded!"

"Good-morning, Morris Finsbury," returned Joseph, with no less asperity; "you are looking seriously ill."

"No use making trouble now," remarked Michael. "Look the facts in the face. Your uncle, as you see, was not so much as shaken in the accident; a man of your humane disposition ought to be delighted."

"Then, if that's so," Morris broke forth, "how about the body? You don't mean to insinuate that thing I schemed and sweated for, and colported with my own hands, was the body of a total stranger?"

"Oh, no, we can't go as far as that," said Michael, soothingly; "you may have met him at the club."

Morris fell into a chair. "I would have found it out if it had come to the house," he complained. "And why didn't it? why did it go to Pitman? what right had Pitman to open it?"

"If you come to that, Morris, what have you done with the colossal Hercules?" asked Michael.

"He went through it with the meat-axe," said John. "It's all in spillikens in the back garden."

"Well, there's one thing," snapped Morris; "there's my uncle again, my fraudulent trustee. He's mine, anyway. And the tontine, too. I claim the tontine; I claim it now. I believe Uncle Masterman's dead."

"I must put a stop to this nonsense," said Michael, "and that forever. You say too near the truth. In one sense your uncle is dead, and has been so long; but not in the sense of the tontine, which it is even on the cards he may yet live to win. Uncle Joseph saw him this morning; he will tell you he still lives, but his mind is in abeyance."

"He did not know me," said Joseph; to do him justice, not without emotion.

"So you're out again there, Morris," said John. "My eye, what a fool you've made of yourself!"

"And that was why you wouldn't compromise," said Morris.

"As for the absurd position in which you and Uncle

Joseph have been making yourselves an exhibition," resumed Michael, "it is more than time it came to an end. I have prepared a proper discharge in full, which you shall sign as a preliminary."

"What!" cried Morris, "and lose my seven thousand eight hundred pounds, and the leather business, and the contingent interest, and get nothing? Thank you!"

"It's like you to feel gratitude, Morris," began Michael.

"Oh, I know it's no good appealing to you, you sneering devil!" cried Morris. "But there's a stranger present, I can't think why, and I appeal to him. I was robbed of this money when I was an orphan, a mere child, at a commercial academy. Since then I've never had a wish but to get back my own. You may hear a lot of stuff about me; and there's no doubt at times I have been ill-advised. But it's the pathos of my situation; that's what I want to show you."

"Morris," interrupted Michael, "I do wish you would let me add one point, for I think it will affect your judgment. It's pathetic too — since that's your taste in literature."

"Well, what is it?" said Morris.

"It's only the name of one of the persons who's to witness your signature, Morris," replied Michael. "His name's Moss, my dear."

There was a long silence. "I might have been sure it was you!" cried Morris.

"You'll sign, won't you?" said Michael.

"Do you know what you're doing?" cried Morris. "You're compounding a felony."

"Very well, then, we won't compound it, Morris," returned Michael. "See how little I understood the sterling integrity of your character! I thought you would prefer it so."

"Look here, Michael," said John, "this is all very fine and large; but how about me? Morris is gone up, I see that; but I'm not. And I was robbed too, mind you; and just as much an orphan, and at the blessed same academy as himself."

"Johnnie," said Michael, "don't you think you'd better leave it to me?"

"I'm your man," said John. "You wouldn't deceive a poor orphan, I'll take my oath. Morris, you sign that document, or I'll start in and astonish your weak mind."

With a sudden alacrity, Morris proffered his willingness; clerks were brought in; the discharge was executed; and there was Joseph a free man once more.

"And now," said Michael, "hear what I propose to do. Here, John and Morris, is the leather business made over to the pair of you in partnership; I have valued it at the lowest possible figure, Pogram and Jarris's. And here is a cheque for the balance of your fortune. Now you see, Morris, you start fresh from the Commercial Academy; and as you said yourself the leather business was looking up, I suppose you'll probably marry before long. Here's your marriage present; from a Mr. Moss."

Morris bounded on his check with a crimsoned countenance.

"I don't understand the performance," remarked John. "It seems too good to be true."

"It's simply a re-adjustment," Michael explained. "I take up Uncle Joseph's liabilities; and if he gets the tontine, it's to be mine. If my father gets it, it's mine anyway, you see. So that I'm rather advantageously placed."

"Morris, my unconverted friend, you've got left," was John's comment.

"And now, Mr. Forsyth," resumed Michael, turning to his silent guest, "here are all the criminals before you, except Pitman. I really didn't like to interrupt his scholastic career; but you can have him arrested at the Seminary: I know his hours. Here we are, then; we're not pretty to look at; what do you propose to do with us?"

"Nothing in the world, Mr. Finsbury," returned Gideon. "I seem to understand that this gentleman"—indicating Morris—"is the *fons et origo* of the trouble; and from what I gather, he has already paid through the nose. And really, to be quite frank, I do not see who is to gain by any scandal; not I, at least. And besides, I have to thank you for that brief."

Michael blushed. "It was the least I could do to let you have some business," he said. "But there's one thing more. I don't want you to misjudge poor Pitman, who is the most harmless being upon earth; I wish you would dine with me to-night, and see the creature on his native heath—say, at Verrey's?"

"I have no engagement, Mr. Finsbury," replied Gideon. "I shall be delighted. But—subject to your judgment—can we do nothing for the man in the cart? I have qualms of conscience."

"Nothing but sympathise," said Michael.

THE EBB TIDE

A TRIO AND QUARTETTE

WRITTEN IN COLLABORATION WITH LLOYD OSBOURNE

❧

PART I

THE TRIO

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THE EBB TIDE

CHAPTER I

NIGHT ON THE BEACH

THROUGHOUT the island world of the Pacific, scattered men of many European races and from almost every grade of society carry activity and disseminate disease. Some prosper, some vegetate. Some have mounted the steps of thrones and owned islands and navies. Others, again, must marry for a livelihood; a strapping, merry, chocolate-coloured dame supports them in sheer idleness; and dressed like natives, but still retaining some foreign element of gait or attitude, still perhaps with some relic (such as a single eye-glass) of the officer and gentleman, they sprawl in palm-leaf verandas, and entertain an island audience with memoirs of the music-hall. And there are still others, less pliable, less capable, less fortunate, perhaps less base, who continue, even in these isles of plenty, to lack bread.

At the far end of the town of Papeete, three such men were seated on the beach, under a *purao* tree.

It was late. Long ago the band had broken up and marched musically home, a motley troop of men and women, merchant-clerks and navy officers dancing in its wake, arms about waist and crowned with garlands. Long ago darkness and silence had gone from house to house about the tiny pagan city. Only the street lamps shone on, making a glow-worm halo in the umbrageous alleys, or drawing a tremulous image on the waters of the port. A sound of snoring ran among the piles of lumber by the Government pier. It was wafted ashore from the graceful, clipper-bottomed schooners, where they lay moored close in like dinghies, and their crews were stretched upon the deck, under the open sky, or huddled in a rude tent amidst the disorder of merchandise.

But the men under the *purao* had no thought of sleep. The same temperature in England would have passed without remark in summer; but it was bitter cold for the South Seas. Inanimate nature knew it, and the bottle of cocoanut oil stood frozen in every bird-cage house about the island; and the men knew it, and shivered. They wore flimsy cotton clothes, the same they had sweated in by day and run the gantlet of the tropic showers; and to complete their evil case, they had had no breakfast to mention, less dinner, and no supper at all.

In the telling South Sea phrase, these three men were *on the beach*. Common calamity had brought them acquainted, as the three most miserable English-speaking creatures in Tahiti; and beyond their misery, they knew next to nothing of each other, not even their true names. For each had made a long apprenticeship in going downward; and, each at some stage of the descent, had been shamed into the adoption of an *alias*.

And yet not one of them had figured in a court of justice. Two were men of kindly virtues; and one, as he sat and shivered under the *purao,* had a tattered Virgil in his pocket.

Certainly, if money could have been raised upon the book, Robert Herrick would long ago have sacrificed that last possession. But the demand for literature, which is so marked a feature in some parts of the South Seas, extends not so far as the dead tongues; and the Virgil, which he could not exchange against a meal, had often consoled him in his hunger. He would study it, as he lay with tightened belt on the floor of the old calaboose, seeking favourite passages, and finding new ones only less beautiful because they lacked the consecration of remembrance. Or he would pause on random country walks, sit on the pathside, gazing over the sea, on the mountains of Eimeo, and dip into the Æneid, seeking *sortes.* And if the oracle (as is the way of oracles) replied with no very certain or encouraging voice, visions of England, at least, would throng upon the exile's memory,—the busy schoolroom; the green playing-fields; holidays at home, and the perennial roar of London; and the fireside, and the white head of his father. For it is the destiny of those grave, restrained, and classic writers, with whom we make enforced and often painful acquaintanceship at school, to pass into the blood and become native in the memory; so that a phrase of Virgil speaks not so much of Mantua or Augustus, but of English places and the student's own irrevocable youth.

Robert Herrick was the son of an intelligent, active, and ambitious man, small partner in a considerable London house. Hopes were conceived of the boy; he was sent to a good school, gained there an Oxford scholarship, and proceeded in course to the Western university. With all his talent and taste (and he had much of both) Robert was deficient in consistency and intellectual manhood, wandered in by-paths of study, worked at music or at metaphysics when he should have been at Greek, and took at last a paltry degree. Almost at the same time the London house was disastrously wound up; Mr. Herrick must begin the world again as a clerk in a strange office, and Robert relinquish his ambitions, and accept with gratitude a career that he detested and despised. He had no head for figures, no interest in affairs, detested the constraint of hours, and despised the aims and the success of merchants. To grow rich was none of his ambitions; rather to do well. A worse or a more bold young man would have refused the destiny; perhaps tried his fortune with his pen; perhaps enlisted. Robert, more prudent, possibly more timid, consented to embrace that way of life in which he could most readily assist his family. But he did so with a mind divided; fled the neighbourhood of former comrades, and chose, out of several positions placed at his disposal, a clerkship in New York.

His career thenceforth was one of unbroken shame. He did not drink, he was exactly honest, he was never rude to his employers, yet was everywhere discharged. Bringing no interest to his duties, he brought no attention; his day was a tissue of things neglected and things done amiss; and from place to place, and from town to town, he carried the character of one thoroughly incompetent. No man can hear the word applied to him without some flush of colour, as indeed there is none other that so emphatically slams in a man's face the door of self-respect. And to Herrick, who was conscious of talents and acquirements, who looked down upon those humble duties in which he was found wanting, the pain was the more exquisite. Early in his fall he had ceased to be able to make remittances; shortly after, having nothing but failure to communicate, he ceased writing home; and about a year before his tale begins, turned suddenly upon the streets of San Francisco by a vulgar and infuriated German Jew, he had broken the last bonds of self-respect, and upon a sudden impulse, changed his name, and invested his last dollar in a passage on the mail brigantine, the *City of Papeete.* With what expectation he had trimmed his flight for the South Seas, Herrick perhaps scarcely knew. Doubtless there were fortunes to be made in pearl and copra; doubtless others, not more gifted than himself, had climbed in the island world to be queens' consorts and kings' ministers. But if Herrick had gone there with any manful purpose, he would have kept his father's name; the *alias* betrayed his moral bankruptcy; he had struck his flag; he entertained no hope to reinstate himself or help his straitened family; and he came to the islands (where he knew the climate to be soft, bread cheap, and manners easy) a skulker from life's battle and his own immediate duty. Failure, he had said, was his portion; let it be a pleasant failure.

It is fortunately not enough to say, "I will be base." Herrick continued in the islands his career of failure; but in the new scene, and under the new name, he suffered no less sharply than before. A place was got, it was lost in the old style. From the long-suffering of the keepers of restaurants, he fell to more open charity upon the wayside; as time went on, good nature became weary, and, after a repulse or two, Herrick became shy. There were women enough who would have supported a far worse and a far uglier man; Herrick never met or never knew them; or if he did both, some manlier feeling would revolt, and he preferred starvation. Drenched with rains, broiling by day, shivering by night, a disused and ruinous prison for a bedroom, his diet begged or pilfered out of rubbish heaps, his associates two creatures equally outcast with himself, he had drained for months the cup of penitence. He had known what it was to be resigned, what it was to break forth in a childish fury of rebellion against fate, and what it was to sink into the coma of despair. The time had changed him. He told himself no longer tales of an easy and perhaps agreeable declension; he read his nature otherwise; he had proved himself incapable of rising, and he now learned by experience that he could not stoop to fall. Something that was scarcely pride or strength, that was perhaps only refinement, withheld him from capitulation; but he looked on upon his own misfortune with a growing rage, and sometimes wondered at his patience.

It was now the fourth month completed, and still there was no change or sign of change. The moon, racing through a world of flying clouds of every size and shape and density, some black as inkstains, some delicate as lawn, threw the marvel of her Southern brightness over the same lovely and detested scene,—the island mountains crowned with the perennial island cloud, the embowered city studded with rare lamps, the masts in the harbour, the smooth mirror of the lagoon, and the mole of the barrier-reef on which the breakers whitened. The moon shone, too, with bull's-eye sweeps, on his companions,—on the stalwart frame of the American who called himself Brown, and was known to be a master-mariner in some disgrace; and on the dwarfish person, the pale eyes, and toothless smile of a vulgar and bad-hearted cockney clerk. Here was society for Robert Herrick! The Yankee skipper was a man at least; he had sterling qualities of tenderness and resolution; he was one whose hand you could take without a blush. But there was no redeeming grace about the other, who called himself sometimes Hay and sometimes Tomkins, and laughed at the discrepancy; who had been employed in every store in Papeete, for the creature was able in his way; who had been discharged from each in turn, for he was wholly vile; who had alienated all his old employers, so that they passed him in the street as if he were a dog, and all his old comrades, so that they shunned him as they would a creditor.

Not long before, a ship from Peru had brought an influenza, and it now raged in the island, and particularly in Papeete. From all round the *purao* arose and fell a dismal sound of men coughing, and strangling as they coughed. The sick natives, with the islander's impatience of a touch of fever, had crawled from their houses to be cool, and, squatting on the shore or on the beached canoes, painfully expected the new day. Even as the crowing of cocks goes about the country in the night, from farm to farm, accesses of coughing arose, and spread, and died in the distance, and sprang up again. Each miserable shiverer caught the suggestion from his neighbour, was torn for some minutes by that cruel ecstasy, and left spent and without voice or courage when it passed. If a man had pity to spend, Papeete Beach, on that cold night and in that infected season, was a place to spend it on. And of all the sufferers, perhaps the least deserving, but surely the most pitiable, was the London clerk. He was used to another life, to houses, beds, nursing, and the dainties of the sick-room; he lay here now, in the cold open, exposed to the gusting of the wind, and with an empty belly. He was besides infirm; the disease shook him to the vitals; and his companions watched his endurance with surprise. A profound commiseration filled them, and contended with and conquered their abhorrence. The disgust attendant on so ugly a sickness magnified this dislike; at the same time, and with more than compensating strength, shame for a sentiment so inhuman bound them the more straitly to his service; and even the evil they knew of him swelled their solicitude, for the thought of death is always least supportable when it draws near to the merely sensual and selfish. Sometimes they held him up; sometimes, with mistaken helpfulness, they beat him between the shoulders; and when the poor wretch lay back, ghastly and spent, after a paroxysm of coughing, they would sometimes peer into his face, doubtfully exploring it for any mark of life. There is no one but has some virtue; that of the clerk was courage, and he would make haste to reassure them in a pleasantry not always decent.

"I'm all right, pals," he gasped once; "this is the thing to strengthen the muscles of the larynx."

"Well, you take the cake!" cried the captain.

"Oh, I'm good-plucked enough," pursued the sufferer, with a broken utterance; "but it do seem bloomin' 'ard to me that I should be the only party to be down with this form of vice, and the only one to do the funny business. I think one of you other parties might walk up. Tell a fellow something."

"The trouble is, we've nothing to tell, my son," returned the captain.

"I'll tell you, if you like, what I was thinking," said Herrick.

"Tell us anything," said the clerk. "I only want to be reminded that I ain't dead."

Herrick took up his parable, lying on his face, and speaking slowly and scarce above his breath; not like a man who has anything to say, but like one talking against time.

"Well, I was thinking this," he began. "I was thinking I lay on Papeete Beach one night,—all moon and squalls, and fellows coughing,—and I was cold and hungry, and down in the mouth, and was about ninety years of age, and had spent about two hundred and twenty of them on Papeete Beach. And I was thinking I wished I had a ring to rub, or had a fairy godmother, or could raise Beelzebub. And I was trying to remember how you did it. I knew you made a ring of skulls, for I had seen that in the 'Freischütz'; and that you took off your coat and turned up your sleeves, for I had seen Formes do that when he was playing Kaspar, and you could see, by the way he went about it, it was a business he had studied; and that you ought to have something to kick up a smoke and a bad smell,—I daresay a cigar might do,—and that you ought to say the Lord's Prayer backward. Well, I wondered if I could do that; it seemed rather a feat, you see. And then I wondered if I could say it forward, and I thought I did. Well, no sooner had I got to 'world without end' than I saw an old man in a *pariu,* and with a mat under his arm, come along the beach from the town. He was rather a hard-favoured old party, and he limped and crippled, and all the time he kept coughing. At first I didn't cotton to his looks, I thought, and then I got sorry for the old soul because he coughed so hard. I remembered we had some of that cough mixture the American consul gave the captain for Hay. It never did Hay a ha'p'orth of service, but I thought it might do the old gentleman's business for him, and stood up.—'*Yorana!*' said I.—'*Yorana!*' says he.—'Look here,' I said, 'I've got some first-rate stuff in a bottle; it'll fix your cough,—savvy? *Harry my,*[1] and I'll measure you out a tablespoonful in the palm of my hand, for all our plate is at the banker's.' So I thought the old party came up, and the nearer he came the less I took to him. But I had passed my word, you see."

"Wot is this bloomin' drivel?" interrupted the clerk. "It's like the rot there is in tracts."

"It's a story. I used to tell them to the kids at home," said Herrick. "If it bores you, I'll drop it."

"Oh, cut along!" returned the sick man irritably "It's better than nothing."

"Well," continued Herrick, "I had no sooner given him the cough mixture than he seemed to straighten up and change, and I saw he wasn't a Tahitian after all, but some kind of an Arab, and had a long beard on his chin. 'One good turn deserves another,' says he. 'I am a magician out of the Arabian Nights, and this mat that I have under my arm is the original carpet of Mohammed Ben Somebody-or-other. Say the word and you can have a cruise upon the carpet.' 'You don't mean to say this is the Travelling Carpet?' I cried. 'You bet I do,' said he. 'You've been to America since last I read the Arabian Nights,' said I, a little suspicious. 'I should think so,' said he. 'Been everywhere. A man with a carpet like this isn't going to moulder in a semi-detached villa.' Well, that struck me as reasonable. 'All right,' I said, 'and do you mean to tell me I can get on that carpet and go straight to London, England?' I said, 'London, England,' captain, because he seemed to have been so long in your part of the world. 'In the crack of a whip,' said he. I figured up the time. What is the difference between Papeete and London, captain?"

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[1] Come here.

"Taking Greenwich and Point Venus, nine hours, odd minutes and seconds," replied the mariner.

"Well, that's about what I made it," resumed Herrick; "about nine hours. Calling this three in the morning, I made out I would drop into London about noon, and the idea tickled me immensely. 'There's only one bother,' I said, 'I haven't a copper cent. It would be a pity to go to London and not buy the morning *Standard.*' 'Oh!' said he, 'you don't realise the conveniences of this carpet. You see this pocket? You've only got to stick your hand in, and you pull it out filled with sovereigns.'"

"Double-eagles, wasn't it?" inquired the captain.

"That was what it was!" cried Herrick. "I thought they seemed unusually big, and I remember now I had to go to the money changers at Charing Cross and get English silver."

"Oh, you went then?" said the clerk. "Wot did you do? Bet you had a B. and S.!"

"Well, you see, it was just as the old boy said, like the cut of a whip," said Herrick. "The one minute I was here on the beach at three in the morning, the next I was in front of the Golden Cross at midday. At first I was dazzled, and covered my eyes, and there didn't seem the smallest change; the roar of the Strand and the roar of the reef were like the same; hark to it now, and you can hear the cabs and the 'busses rolling and the streets resound! And then at last I would look about, and there was the old place and no mistake, with the statues in the square, and St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, and the bobbies, and the sparrows, and the hacks; and I can't tell you what I felt like. I felt like crying, I believe, or dancing, or jumping clean over the Nelson column. I was like a fellow caught up out of hell and flung down into the dandiest part of heaven. Then I spotted for a hansom with a spanking horse. 'A shilling for yourself if you're there in twenty minutes,' said I to the jarvey. He went a good pace, though, of course, it was a trifle to the carpet; and in nineteen minutes and a half I was at the door."

"What door?" asked the captain.

"Oh, a house I know of," returned Herrick.

"Bet it was a public house!" cried the clerk — only these were not his words. "And w'y didn't you take the carpet there instead of trundling in a growler?"

"I didn't want to startle a quiet street," said the narrator. "Bad form. And besides, it was a hansom."

"Well, and what did you do next?" inquired the captain.

"Oh, I went in," said Herrick.

"The old folks?" asked the captain.

"That's about it," said the other, chewing a grass.

"Well, I think you are about the poorest 'and at a yarn!" cried the clerk. "Crikey, it's like 'Ministering Children.' I can tell you there would be more beer and skittles about my little jaunt. I would go and have a B. and S. for luck. Then I would get a big ulster with astrakhan fur, and take my cane, and do the la-de-da down Piccadilly. Then I would go to a slap-up restaurant, and have green peas and a bottle of fizz and a chump chop — Oh! and I forgot, I'd 'ave some devilled w'itebait first, and green gooseberry tart, and 'ot coffee, and some of that form of vice in big bottles with a seal — Benedictine — that's the bloomin' nyme! Then I'd drop into a theatre, and pal on with some chappies, and do the dancing-rooms and bars and that, and wouldn't go 'ome till morning, till d'ylight doth appear. And the next d'y I'd 'ave water-creases, 'am, muffin, and fresh butter; wouldn't I just? Oh, my!"

The clerk was interrupted by a fresh attack of coughing.

"Well, now, I'll tell you what I would do," said the captain. "I would have none of your fancy rigs with the man driving from the mizzen cross-trees, but a plain fore-and-aft hack cab of the highest registered tonnage.

First of all, I would bring up at the market and get a turkey and a sucking pig. Then I'd go to a wine merchant's and get a dozen of champagne and a dozen of some sweet wine, rich and sticky and strong, something in the port or Madeira line, the best in the store. Then I'd bear up for a toy store, and lay out twenty dollars in assorted toys for the piccaninnies; and then to a confectioner's and take in cakes and pies and fancy bread, and that stuff with the plums in it; and then to a news agency, and buy all the papers — all the picture ones for the kids, and all the story papers for the old girl: about the Earl discovering himself to Anna Maria, and the escape of the Lady Maude from the Private Madhouse; and then I'd tell the fellow to drive home."

"There ought to be some syrup for the kids," suggested Herrick. "They like syrup."

"Yes, syrup for the kids, red syrup at that!" said the captain. "And those things they pull at and go pop, and have measly poetry inside. And then I tell you we'd have a Thanksgiving Day and Christmas tree combined. Great Scott, but I would like to see the kids! I guess they would light right out of the house when they saw daddy driving up. My little Adar ——"

The captain stopped sharply.

"Well, keep it up," said the clerk.

"The damned thing is, I don't know if they are n't starving!" cried the captain.

"They can't be worse off than we are, and that's one comfort," returned the clerk. "I defy the devil to make me worse off."

It seemed as if the devil heard him. The light of the moon had been some time cut off, and they had talked in darkness. Now there was heard a roar, which drew impetuously nearer; the face of the lagoon was seen to whiten, and, before they had staggered to their feet, a squall burst in rain upon the outcasts. The rage and volume of that avalanche, one must have lived in the tropics to conceive; a man panted in its assault as he might pant under a shower bath; and the world seemed whelmed in night and water.

They fled, groping for their usual shelter — it might be almost called their home — in the old calaboose; came drenched into its empty chambers, and lay down, three sops of humanity, on the cold coral floors. And presently, when the squall was overpassed, the others could hear in the darkness the chattering of the clerk's teeth.

"I say, you fellows," he wailed, "for God's sake lie up and try to warm me. I'm blymed if I don't think I'll die else!"

So the three crept together into one wet mass, and lay until day came, shivering and dozing off, and continually reawakened to wretchedness by the coughing of the clerk.

CHAPTER II

MORNING ON THE BEACH.—THE THREE LETTERS

THE clouds were all fled, the beauty of the tropic day was spread upon Papeete; and the wall of breaking seas upon the reef, and the palms upon the islet, already trembled in the heat. A French man-of-war was going out that morning, homeward bound; she lay in the middle distance of the port, an ant-heap for activity. In the night a schooner had come in, and now lay far out, hard by the passage; and the yellow flag, the emblem of pestilence, flew on her. From up the coast a long procession of canoes headed round the point and toward the market, bright as a scarf with the many-coloured clothing of the natives and the piles of fruit. But not even the beauty and the welcome warmth of the morning, not even these naval movements, so interesting to sailors and to idlers, could engage the attention of the outcasts. They were still cold at heart, their mouths sour from the want of sleep, their steps rambling from the lack of food; and they strung like lame geese along the beach in a disheartened silence. It was towards the town they moved; towards the town whence smoke arose, where happier folk were breakfasting; and as they went, their hungry eyes were upon all sides, but they were only scouting for a meal.

A small and dingy schooner lay snug against the quay, with which it was connected by a plank. On the forward deck, under a spot of awning, five Kanakas, who made up the crew, were squatted round a basin of fried *feis*[1] and drinking coffee from tin mugs.

"Eight bells; knock off for breakfast!" cried the captain with a miserable heartiness. "Never tried this craft before; positively my first appearance; guess I'll draw a bumper house."

He came close up to where the plank rested on the grassy quay, turned his back upon the schooner, and began to whistle that lively air, "The Irish Washerwoman." It caught the ears of the Kanaka seamen like a preconcerted signal. With one accord they looked up from their meal and crowded to the ship's side, *fei* in hand, and munching as they looked. Even as a poor brown Pyrenean bear dances in the streets of English towns under his master's baton, even so, but with how much more of spirit and precision, the captain footed it in time to his own whistling, and his long morning shadow capered beyond him on the grass. The Kanakas smiled on the performance; Herrick looked on heavy-eyed, hunger for the moment conquering all sense of shame; and a little farther off, but still hard by, the clerk was torn by the seven devils of the influenza.

The captain stopped suddenly, appeared to perceive his audience for the first time, and represented the part of a man surprised in a private hour of pleasure.

"Hello!" said he.

The Kanakas clapped hands and called upon him to go on.

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[1] *Fei* is the hill banana.

"No, *sir!*" said the captain. "No eat, no dance. Savvy?"

"Poor old man!" returned one of the crew. "Him no eat?"

"Lord, no!" said the captain. "Like-um too much eat. No got."

"All right. Me got," said the sailor. "You tome here. Plenty toffee, plenty *fei*. Nutha man him tome too."

"I guess we'll drop right in," observed the captain; and he and his companions hastened up the plank. They were welcomed on board with the shaking of hands; place was made for them about the basin; a sticky demijohn of molasses was added to the feast in honor of company, and an accordion brought from the forecastle, and significantly laid by the performer's side.

"*Ariana*,"[1] said he, lightly touching the instrument as he spoke; and he fell to on a long savory *fei*, made an end of it, raised his mug of coffee, and nodded across at the spokesman of the crew. "Here's your health, old man. You're a credit to the South Pacific," said he.

With the unsightly greed of hounds they glutted themselves with the hot food and coffee; and even the clerk revived and the colour deepened in his eyes. The kettle was drained, the basin cleaned; their entertainers, who had waited on their wants throughout with the pleased hospitality of Polynesians, made haste to bring forward a dessert of island tobacco and rolls of pandanus leaf to serve as paper, and presently all sat about the dishes, puffing like Indian sachems.

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[1] By and by.

"When a man 'as breakfast every day, he don't know wot it is," observed the clerk.

"The next point is dinner," said Herrick; and then with a passionate utterance: "I wish to God I was a Kanaka!"

"There's one thing sure," said the captain. "I'm about desperate. I'd rather hang than rot here much longer." And with the word he took the accordion and struck up "Home, Sweet Home."

"Oh, drop that!" cried Herrick. "I can't stand that."

"No more can I," said the captain. "I've got to play something, though; got to pay the shot, my son." And he struck up "John Brown's Body" in a fine, sweet baritone; "Dandy Jim of Carolina" came next; "Rosin the Bow," "Swing low, sweet chariot," and "The Beautiful Land" followed. The captain was paying his shot with usury, as he had done many a time before; many a meal had he bought with the same currency from the melodious-minded natives, always, as now, to their delight.

He was in the middle of "Fifteen dollars in the inside pocket," singing with dogged energy, for the task went sore against the grain, when a sensation was suddenly to be observed among the crew.

"Tapena Tom *harry my,*"[1] said the spokesman, pointing.

And the three beach-combers, following his indication, saw the figure of a man in pyjama trousers and a white jumper approaching briskly from the town.

"That's Tapena Tom, is it?" said the captain, pausing in his music. "I don't seem to place the brute."

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[1] Captain Tom is coming.

"We'd better cut," said the clerk. "'E's no good."

"Well," said the musician deliberately, "one can't most always generally tell. I'll try it on, I guess. Music has charms to soothe the savage tapena, boys. We might strike it rich; it might amount to iced punch in the cabin."

"Hiced punch? Oh, my!" said the clerk. "Give him something 'ot, captain. 'Way down the Swanee River;' try that."

"No, *sir!* Looks Scotch," said the captain; and he struck, for his life, into "Auld Lang Syne."

Captain Tom continued to approach with the same business-like alacrity; no change was to be perceived in his bearded face as he came swinging up the plank; he did not even turn his eyes on the performer.

> "We twa hae paidled in the burn
> Frae morning tide till dine,"

went the song.

Captain Tom had a parcel under his arm, which he laid on the house-roof, and then, turning suddenly to the strangers, "Here, you!" he bellowed, "be off out of that!"

The clerk and Herrick stood not on the order of their going, but fled incontinently by the plank. The performer, on the other hand, flung down the instrument and rose to his full height slowly.

"What's that you say?" he said. "I've half a mind to give you a lesson in civility."

"You set up any more of your gab to me," returned the Scotchman, "and I'll show ye the wroang side of a jyle. I've heard tell of the three of ye. Ye're not long for here, I can tell ye that. The Goavernment has their eyes upon ye. They make shoart work of damned beach-combers, I'll say that for the French."

"You wait till I catch you off your ship!" cried the captain; and then turning to the crew, "Good-by, you fellows!" he said. "You're gentlemen, anyway! The worst nigger among you would look better upon a quarter-deck than that filthy Scotchman."

Captain Tom scorned to reply. He watched with a hard smile the departure of his guests, and as soon as the last foot was off the plank, turned to the hands to work cargo.

The beach-combers beat their inglorious retreat along the shore; Herrick first, his face dark with blood, his knees trembling under him with the hysteria of rage. Presently, under the same *purao* where they had shivered the night before, he cast himself down, and groaned aloud, and ground his face into the sand.

"Don't speak to me! don't speak to me. I can't stand it!" broke from him.

The other two stood over him, perplexed.

"Wot can't he stand now?" said the clerk. "'Asn't he 'ad a meal? *I'm* lickin' my lips."

Herrick reared up his wild eyes and burning face. "I can't beg," he screamed, and again threw himself prone.

"This thing's got to come to an end," said the captain, with an intake of the breath.

"Looks like signs of an end, don't it?" sneered the clerk.

"He's not so far from it, and don't you deceive yourself," replied the captain. "Well," he added in a livelier voice, "you fellows hang on here, and I'll go and interview my representative."

Whereupon he turned on his heel, and set off at a swinging sailor's walk towards Papeete.

It was some half-hour later when he returned. The clerk was dozing with his back against a tree; Herrick still lay where he had flung himself; nothing showed whether he slept or waked.

"See, boys!" cried the captain, with that artificial heartiness of his which was at times so painful, "here's a new idea." And he produced note-paper, stamped envelopes, and pencils, three of each. "We can all write home by the mail brigantine. The consul says I can come over to his place and ink up the addresses."

"Well, that's a start, too," said the clerk. "I never thought of that."

"It was that yarning last night about going home that put me up to it," said the captain.

"Well, 'and over," said the clerk. "I'll have a shy." And he retired a little distance to the shade of a canoe.

The others remained under the *purao.* Now they would write a word or two, now scribble it out; now they would sit biting at the pencil-end and staring seaward; now their eyes would rest on the clerk where he sat propped on the canoe, leering and coughing, his pencil racing glibly on the paper.

"I can't do it," said Herrick, suddenly. "I haven't got the heart."

"See here," said the captain, speaking with unwonted gravity. "It may be hard to write, and to write lies at that, and God knows it is; but it's the square thing. It don't cost anything to say you're well and happy, and sorry you can't make a remittance this mail; and if you don't, I'll tell you what I think it is,—I think it's about the high-water mark of being a brute beast."

"It's easy to talk," said Herrick. "You don't seem to have written much yourself, I notice."

"What do you bring in me for?" broke from the captain. His voice was indeed scarce raised above a whisper, but emotion clanged in it. "What do you know about me? If you had commanded the finest barque that ever sailed from Portland, Maine; if you had been drunk in your berth when she struck the breakers in Fourteen Island Group, and hadn't had the wit to stay there and drown, but come on deck, and given drunken orders, and lost six lives,—I could understand your talking then! There," he said more quietly, "that's my yarn, and now you know it. It's a pretty one for the father of a family. Five men and a woman murdered. Yes, there was a woman on board, and hadn't no business to be either. Guess I sent her to hell, if there is such a place. I never dared go home again; and the wife and the little ones went to England to her father's place. I don't know what's come to them," he added, with a bitter shrug.

"Thank you, Captain," said Herrick. "I never liked you better."

They shook hands, short and hard, with eyes averted, tenderness swelling in their bosoms.

"Now, boys! to work again at lying!" said the captain.

"I'll give my father up," returned Herrick, with a writhen smile. "I'll try my sweetheart, instead, for a change of evils."

And here is what he wrote:—

"Emma,—I have scratched out the beginning to my father, for I think I can write more easily to you. This is my last farewell to all; the last you will ever hear or see of an unworthy friend and son. I have failed in life. I am quite broken down and disgraced. I pass under a false name. You will have to tell my father that, with all your kindness. It is my own fault. I know, had I chosen, that I might have done well; and yet, I swear to you, I tried to choose. I could not bear that you should think I did not try. For I loved you all; you must never doubt me in that, you least of all. I have always unceasingly loved; but what was my love worth, and what was I worth? I had not the manhood of a common clerk. I could not work to earn you. I have lost you now, and for your sake I could be glad of it. When you first came to my father's house — do you remember those days? I want you to — you saw the best of me then, all that was good in me. Do you remember the day I took your hand and would not let it go? And the day on Battersea Bridge, when we were looking at a barge, and I began to tell one of my silly stories, and broke off to say I loved you? That was the beginning, and now here is the end. When you have read this letter, you will go round and kiss them all good-by — my father and mother, and the children, one by one, and poor uncle; and tell them all to forget me, and forget me yourself. Turn the key in the door; let no thought of me return; be done with the poor ghost that pretended he was a man and stole your love. Scorn of myself grinds in me as I write. I should tell you I am well and happy and want for nothing. I do not exactly make money, or I should send a remittance; but I am well cared for, have friends, live in a beautiful place and climate, such as we have dreamed of together, and no pity need be wasted on me. In such places, you understand, it is easy to live, and live well, but often hard to make sixpence in money. Explain this to my father; he will understand. I have no more to say; only linger, going out, like an unwilling guest. God in heaven bless you! Think of me, at the last, here, on a bright beach, the sky and sea immoderately blue, and the great breakers roaring outside on a barrier-reef, where a little isle sits green with palms. I am well and strong. It is a more pleasant way to die than if you were crowding about me on a sick-bed. And yet I am dying. This is my last kiss. Forgive, forget, the unworthy."

So far he had written; his paper was all filled, when there returned a memory of evenings at the piano, and that song, the masterpiece of love, in which so many have found the expression of their dearest thoughts: *Einst, O Wunder!* he added. More was not required; he knew that, in his love's heart, the context would spring up, escorted with fair images and harmony; of how all through life her name should tremble in his ears, her name be everywhere repeated in the sounds of nature; and when death came and he lay dissolved, her memory linger and thrill among his elements.

> "Once, O wonder! once from the ashes of my heart
> Arose a blossom ——"

Herrick and the captain finished their letters about the same time; each was breathing deep, and their eyes met and were averted as they closed the envelopes.

"Sorry I write so big," said the captain, gruffly. "Came all of a rush, when it did come."

"Same here," said Herrick. "I could have done with a ream when I got started; but it's long enough for all the good I had to say."

They were still at the addresses when the clerk strolled up, smirking, and twirling his envelope, like a man well pleased. He looked over Herrick's shoulder.

"Hullo," he said, "you ain't writing 'ome."

"I am, though," said Herrick. "She lives with my father. Oh, I see what you mean," he added. "My real name is Herrick. No more Hay"—they had both used the same *alias*—"no more Hay than yours, I dare say."

"Clean bowled in the middle stump," laughed the clerk. "My name's 'Uish, if you want to know. Everybody has a false nyme in the Pacific. Lay you five to three the captain 'as."

"So I have, too," replied the captain, "and I've never told my own since the day I tore the title-page out of my Bowditch and flung the damned thing into the sea. But I'll tell it to you, boys. John Davis is my name. I'm Davis of the *Sea Ranger*."

"Dooce you are!" said Huish. "And what was she, a pirate or a slyver?"

"She was the fastest barque out of Portland, Maine," replied the captain; "and for the way I lost her, I might as well have bored a hole in her side with an auger."

"Oh, you lost her, did you?" said the clerk. "'Ope she was insured."

No answer being returned to this sally, Huish, still brimming over with vanity and conversation, struck into another subject.

"I've a good mind to read you my letter," said he. "I've a good fist with a pen when I choose, and this is a prime lark. She was a barmaid I ran across in Northampton; she was a spanking fine piece, no end of style; and we cottoned at first sight like parties in the play. I suppose I spent the chynge of a fiver on that girl. Well, I 'appened to remember her nyme, so I wrote to her, and told her 'ow I had got rich, and married a queen in the Hislands, and lived in a blooming palace. Such a sight of crammers! I must read you one bit about my opening the nigger parliament in a cocked 'at. It's really prime."

The captain jumped to his feet. "That's what you did with the paper that I went and begged for you?" he roared.

It was perhaps lucky for Huish — it was surely in the end unfortunate for all — that he was seized just then by one of his prostrating accesses of cough; his comrades would have else deserted him, so bitter was their resentment. When the fit had passed, the clerk reached out his hand, picked up the letter, which had fallen to the earth, and tore it into fragments, stamp and all.

"Does that satisfy you?" he asked sullenly.

"We'll say no more about it," replied Davis.

CHAPTER III

THE OLD CALABOOSE.—DESTINY AT THE DOOR

The old calaboose, in which the waifs had so long harboured, was a low, rectangular enclosure of building, at the corner of a shady western avenue, and a little townward of the British Consulate. Within was a grassy court, littered with wreckage and the traces of vagrant occupation. Six or seven cells opened from the court; the doors, that had once been locked on mutinous whalermen, rotting before them in the grass. No mark remained of their old destination, except the rusty bars upon the windows.

The floor of one of the cells had been little cleared; a bucket (the last remaining piece of furniture of the three caitiffs) stood full of water by the door, a half cocoanut-shell beside it for a drinking-cup; and on some ragged ends of mat Huish sprawled asleep, his mouth open, his face deathly. The glow of the tropic afternoon, the green of sun-bright foliage, stared into that shady place through door and window; and Herrick, pacing to and fro on the coral floor, sometimes paused, and laved his face and neck with tepid water from the bucket. His long arrears of suffering, the night's vigil, the insults of the morning, and the harrowing business of the letter, had strung him to that point when pain is almost pleasure, time shrinks to a mere point, and death and life appear indifferent. To and fro he paced like a caged brute, his mind whirling through the universe of thought and memory; his eyes, as he went, skimming the legends on the wall. The crumbling whitewash was all full of them,—Tahitian names, and French and English, and rude sketches of ships under sail, and men at fisticuffs.

It came to him of a sudden that he too must leave upon these walls the memorial of his passage. He paused before a clean space, took the pencil out, and pondered. Vanity, so hard to dislodge, awoke in him. We call it vanity, at least; perhaps unjustly. Rather it was the bare sense of his existence prompted him; the sense of his life, the one thing wonderful, to which he scarce clung with a finger. From his jarred nerves there came a strong sentiment of coming change; whether good or ill, he could not say: change,—he knew no more; change, with inscrutable, veiled face, approaching noiseless. With the feeling came the vision of a concert-room, the rich hues of instruments, the silent audience, and the loud voice of the symphony. "Destiny knocking at the door," he thought; drew a stave on the plaster, and wrote in the famous phrase from the Fifth Symphony. "So," thought he, "they will know that I loved music and had classical tastes. They? He, I suppose; the unknown, kindred spirit that shall come some day and read my *memor querela.* Ha! he shall have Latin too." And he added: *"terque quaterque beati queis ante ora patrum."*

He turned again to his uneasy pacing, but now with an irrational and supporting sense of duty done. He had dug his grave that morning; now he had carved his epitaph; the folds of the toga were composed, why should he delay the insignificant trifle that remained to do? He paused and looked long in the face of the sleeping Huish, drinking disenchantment and distaste of life. He nauseated himself with that vile countenance. Could the thing continue? What bound him now? Had he no rights? Only the obligation to go on, without discharge or furlough, bearing the unbearable? *Ich trage unerträgliches;* the quotation rose in his mind. He repeated the whole piece, one of the most perfect of the most perfect of poets; and a phrase struck him like a blow: *Du, stolzes Herz, du hast es ja gewollt.* Where was the pride of his heart? And he raged against himself, as a man bites on a sore tooth, in a heady sensuality of scorn. "I have no pride, I have no heart, no manhood," he thought, "or why should I prolong a life more shameful than the gallows? Or why should I have fallen to it? No pride, no capacity, no force. Not even a bandit. And to be starving here with worse than banditti—with this trivial hell-hound!" His rage against his comrade rose and flooded him, and he shook a trembling fist at the sleeper.

A swift step was audible. The captain appeared upon the threshold of the cell, panting and flushed, and with a foolish face of happiness. In his arms he carried a loaf of bread and bottles of beer; the pockets of his coat were bulging with cigars. He rolled his treasures on the floor, grasped Herrick by both hands, and crowed with laughter.

"Broach the beer!" he shouted. "Broach the beer, and glory hallelujah!"

"Beer?" repeated Huish, struggling to his feet.

"Beer it is!" cried Davis. "Beer, and plenty of it. Any number of persons can use it (like Lyon's tooth tablet) with perfect propriety and neatness. Who's to officiate?"

"Leave me alone for that," said the clerk. He knocked the necks off with a lump of coral, and each drank in succession from the shell.

"Have a weed?" said Davis. "It's all in the bill."

"What is up?" asked Herrick.

The captain fell suddenly grave. "I'm coming to that," said he. "I want to speak with Herrick here. You, Hay — or Huish, or whatever your name is — you take a weed and the other bottle, and go and see how the wind is down by the *purao.* I'll call you when you're wanted."

"Hey? Secrets? That ain't the ticket," said Huish.

"Look here, my son," said the captain, "this is business, and don't you make any mistake about it. If you're going to make trouble, you can have it in your own way and stop right here. Only get the thing right; if Herrick and I go, we take the beer. Savvy?"

"Oh, I don't want to shove my oar in," returned Huish. "I'll cut right enough. Give me the swipes. You can jaw till you're blue in the face, for what I care. I don't think it's the friendly touch; that's all." And he shambled, grumbling, out of the cell into the staring sun.

The captain watched him clear of the courtyard, then turned to Herrick.

"What is it?" asked Herrick, thickly.

"I'll tell you," said Davis. "I want to consult you.

It's a chance we've got. What's that?" he cried, pointing to the music on the wall.

"What?" said the other. "Oh, that! It's music; it's a phrase of Beethoven's I was writing up. It means destiny knocking at the door."

"Does it?" said the captain, rather low, and he went near and studied the inscription; "and this French?" he asked, pointing to the Latin.

"Oh, it just means I should have been luckier if I had died at home," returned Herrick impatiently. "What is this business?"

"Destiny knocking at the door," repeated the captain; and then, looking over his shoulder, "Well, Mr. Herrick, that's about what it comes to," he added.

"What do you mean? Explain yourself," said Herrick.

But the captain was again staring at the music. "About how long ago since you wrote up this truck?" he asked.

"What does it matter?" exclaimed Herrick. "I dare say half an hour."

"My God, it's strange!" cried Davis. "There's some men would call that accidental; not me. That—" and he drew his thick finger under the music—"that's what I call providence."

"You said we had a chance?" asked Herrick.

"Yes, *sir!*" said the captain, wheeling suddenly face to face with his companion. "I did so. If you're the man I take you for, we have a chance."

"I don't know what you take me for," was the reply. "You can scarce take me too low."

"Shake hands, Mr. Herrick," said the captain. "I know you. You're a gentleman and a man of spirit. I didn't want to speak before that bummer there; you'll see why. But to you I'll rip it right out. I got a ship."

"A ship?" cried Herrick. "What ship?"

"That schooner we saw this morning off the passage."

"The schooner with the hospital flag?"

"That's the hooker," said Davis. "She's the *Farallone,* hundred and sixty tons register, out of 'Frisco for Sydney, in California champagne. Captain, mate, and one hand all died of small-pox, same as they had round in the Paumotus, I guess. Captain and mate were the only white men; all the hands Kanakas; seems a queer kind of outfit from a Christian port. Three of them left and a cook; didn't know where they were; I can't think where they were either, if you come to that; Wiseman must have been upon the booze, I guess, to sail the course he did. However, there *he* was, dead; and here were the Kanakas as good as lost. They bummed around at sea like the babes in the wood, and tumbled end-on upon Tahiti. The consul here took charge. He offered the berth to Williams; Williams had never had the small-pox and backed down. That was when I came in for the letter-paper. I thought there was something up when the consul asked me to look in again; but I never let on to you fellows, so's you'd not be disappointed. Consul tried M'Neil; scared of small-pox. He tried Capriati, that Corsican, and Leblue, or whatever his name is; wouldn't lay a hand on it; all too fond of their sweet lives. Last of all, when there wasn't nobody else left to offer it to, he offers it to me. 'Brown, will you ship captain and take her to Sydney?' says he. 'Let me choose my own mate and another white hand,' says I, 'for I don't hold with this Kanaka crew racket; give us all two months' advance to get our clothes and instruments out of pawn, and I'll take stock to-night, fill up stores, and get to sea to-morrow before dark!' That's what I said. 'That's good enough,' says the consul; 'and you can count yourself damned lucky, Brown,' says he. And he said it pretty meaningful-appearing, too. However, that's all one now. I'll ship Huish before the mast,—of course I'll let him berth aft; and I'll ship you mate at seventy-five dollars and two months' advance."

"Me mate? Why, I'm a landsman!" cried Herrick.

"Guess you've got to learn," said the captain. "You don't fancy I'm going to skip and leave you rotting on the beach perhaps? I'm not that sort, old man. And you're handy, anyway; I've been shipmates with worse."

"God knows I can't refuse," said Herrick. "God knows I thank you from my heart."

"That's all right," said the captain. "But it ain't all." He turned aside to light a cigar.

"What else is there?" asked the other, with a pang of indefinable alarm.

"I'm coming to that," said Davis, and then paused a little. "See here," he began, holding out his cigar between his finger and thumb, "suppose you figure up what this'll amount to. You don't catch on? Well, we get two months' advance; we can't get away from Papeete — our creditors wouldn't let us go — for less. It'll take us along about two months to get to Sydney; and when we get there — I just want to put it to you squarely — what the better are we?"

"We're off the beach, at least," said Herrick.

"I guess there's a beach at Sydney," returned the captain; "and I'll tell you one thing, Mr. Herrick — I don't mean to try. No, *sir!* Sydney will never see me."

"Speak out plain," said Herrick.

"Plain Dutch," replied the captain, "I'm going to own that schooner. It's nothing new; it's done every year in the Pacific. Stephens stole a schooner the other day, didn't he? Hayes and Pease stole vessels all the time. And it's the making of the crowd of us. See here, you think of that cargo. Champagne! Why, it's like as if it was put up on purpose. In Peru, we'll sell that liquor off at the pier head, and the schooner after it, if we can find a fool to buy her, and then light out for the mines. If you'll back me up, I stake my life I'll carry it through."

"Captain," said Herrick, with a quailing voice, "don't do it!"

"I'm desperate," returned Davis. "I've got a chance; I may never get another. Herrick, say the word; back me up. I think we've starved together long enough for that."

"I can't do it. I'm sorry. I can't do it. I've not fallen as low as that," said Herrick, deadly pale.

"What did you say this morning?" said Davis. "That you couldn't beg? It's the one thing or the other, my son."

"Ah, but this is the jail!" cried Herrick. "Don't tempt me. It's the jail."

"Did you hear what the skipper said on board that schooner?" pursued the captain. "Well, I tell you he talked straight. The French have let us alone a long time; it can't last longer. They've got their eye on us, and as sure as you live, in three weeks you'll be in jail, whatever you do. I read it in the consul's face."

"You forget, captain," said the young man. "There is another way. I can die; and to say truth, I think I should have died three years ago."

The captain folded his arms and looked the other in the face. "Yes," said he, "yes, you can cut your throat; that's a frozen fact. Much good may it do you! And where do I come in?"

The light of a strange excitement came in Herrick's face. "Both of us," said he, "both of us together. It 's not possible you can enjoy this business. Come," and he reached out a timid hand, "a few strokes in the lagoon — and rest!"

"I tell you, Herrick, I'm 'most tempted to answer you the way the man does in the Bible, and say, 'Get thee behind me, Satan!'" said the captain. "What! you think I would go drown myself, and I got children starving? Enjoy it? No, by God! I do not enjoy it; but it's the row I've got to hoe, and I'll hoe it till I drop right here. I have three of them, you see, two boys and the one girl, Adar. The trouble is that you are not a parent yourself. I tell you, Herrick, I love you," the man broke out. "I didn't take to you at first, you were so Anglified and tony, but I love you now; it's a man that loves you stands here and wrestles with you. I can't go to sea with the bummer alone; it's not possible. Go drown yourself, and there goes my last chance, — the last chance of a poor, miserable beast earning a crust to feed his family. I can't do nothing but sail ships, and I've no papers. And here I get a chance, and you go back on me! Ah, you've no family, and that's where the trouble is!"

"I have indeed," said Herrick.

"Yes, I know," said the captain, "you think so. But no man's got a family till he's got children. It's only the kids count. There's something about the little shavers — I can't talk of them. And if you thought a cent about this father that I hear you talk of, or that sweetheart you were writing to this morning, you would feel like me. You would say, 'What matter laws, and God, and that? My folks are hard up ; I belong to them. I'll get them bread, or, by God! I'll get them wealth, if I have to burn down London for it.' That's what you would say. And I'll tell you more: your heart is saying so this living minute. I can see it in your face. You're thinking, 'Here's poor friendship for the man I've starved along of; and as for the girl that I set up to be in love with, here's a mighty limp kind of a love that won't carry me as far as 'most any man would go for a demijohn of whisky.' There's not much *ro*mance to that love, anyway; it's not the kind they carry on about in song books. But what's the good of my carrying on talking, when it's all in your inside as plain as print? I put the question to you once for all. Are you going to desert me in my hour of need — you know if I've deserted you — or will you give me your hand, and try a fresh deal, and go home (as like as not) a millionnaire? Say no, and God pity me! Say yes, and I'll make the little ones pray for you every night on their bended knees. 'God bless Mr. Herrick!' that's what they'll say, one after the other, the old girl sitting there holding stakes at the foot of the bed, and the damned little innocents—" He broke off. "I don't often rip out about the kids," he said, "but when I do, there's something fetches loose."

"Captain," said Herrick, faintly, "is there nothing else?"

"I'll prophesy if you like," said the captain, with renewed vigour. "Refuse this because you think yourself too honest, and before a month's out you'll be jailed for a sneak-thief. I give you the word fair. I can see it, Herrick, if you can't; you're breaking down. Don't think, if you refuse this chance, that you'll go on doing the evangelical; you're about through with your stock, and before you know where you are, you'll be right out on the other side. No, it's either this for you, or else it's Caledonia. I bet you never were there, and saw those white, shaved men, in their dust clothes and straw hats, prowling around in gangs in the lamplight at Noumea; they look like wolves, and they look like preachers, and they look like the sick. Huish is a daisy to the best of them. Well, there's your company. They're waiting for you, Herrick, and you got to go; and that's a prophecy."

And as the man stood and shook through his great stature, he seemed, indeed, like one in whom the spirit of divination worked and might utter oracles. Herrick looked at him and looked away; it seemed not decent to spy upon such agitation, and the young man's courage sank.

"You talk of going home," he objected. "We could never do that."

"*We* could," said the other. "Captain Brown couldn't, nor a Mr. Hay that shipped mate with him couldn't. But what's that to do with Captain Davis or Mr. Herrick, you galoot?"

"But Hayes had these wild islands where he used to call," came the next, fainter objection.

"We have the wild islands of Peru," retorted Davis. "They were wild enough for Stephens no longer agone than just last year. I guess they'll be wild enough for us."

"And the crew?"

"All Kanakas. Come, I see you're right, old man. I see you'll stand by." And the captain once more offered his hand.

"Have it your own way, then," said Herrick. "I'll do it. A strange thing for my father's son. But I'll do it. I'll stand by you, man, for good or evil."

"God bless you!" cried the captain, and stood silent. "Herrick," he added, with a smile, "I believe I'd have died in my tracks if you'd have said no."

And Herrick, looking at the man, half-believed so also.

"And now we'll go break it to the bummer," said Davis.

"I wonder how he'll take it," said Herrick.

"Him? Jump at it!" was the reply.

CHAPTER IV

THE YELLOW FLAG

THE schooner *Farallone* lay well out in the jaws of the pass, where the terrified pilot had made haste to bring her to her moorings and escape. Seen from the beach, through the thin line of shipping, two objects stood conspicuous to seaward, — the little isle, on the one hand, with its palms, and the guns and batteries raised forty years before in defence of Queen Pomaré's capital; the outcast *Farallone* upon the other, banished to the threshold of the port, rolling there to her scuppers, and flaunting the plague flag as she rolled. A few sea-birds screamed and cried about the ship, and within easy range a man-of-war guard-boat hung off and on, and glittered with the weapons of marines. The exuberant daylight and the blinding heaven of the tropics picked out and framed the picture.

A neat boat, manned by natives in uniform, and steered by the doctor of the port, put from shore towards three of the afternoon, and pulled smartly for the schooner. The foresheets were heaped with sacks of flour, onions, and potatoes, perched among which was Huish, dressed as a foremast hand; a heap of chests and cases impeded the action of the oarsmen; and in the stern, by the left hand of the doctor, sat Herrick, dressed in a fresh rig of slops, his brown beard trimmed to a point, a pile of paper novels on his lap, and nursing the while between his feet a chronometer, for which they had exchanged that of the *Farallone,* long since run down and the rate lost.

They passed the guard-boat, exchanging hails with the boatswain's mate in charge, and drew near at last to the forbidden ship. Not a cat stirred; there was no speech of man; and the sea being exceedingly high outside, and the reef close to where the schooner lay, the clamour of the surf hung round her like the sound of battle.

"*Ohé la goëlette!*" sang out the doctor, with his best voice.

Instantly, from the house, where they had been stowing away stores, first Davis and then the ragamuffin swarthy crew made their appearance.

"Hullo, Hay, that you?" said the captain, leaning on the rail. "Tell the old man to lay her alongside as if she was eggs. There's a hell of a run of sea here, and his boat's brittle."

The movement of the schooner was at that time more than usually violent. Now she heaved her side as high as a deep-sea steamer's, and showed the flashing of her copper; now she swung swiftly toward the boat until her scuppers gurgled.

"I hope you have sea-legs," observed the doctor. "You will require them."

Indeed, to board the *Farallone,* in that exposed position where she lay, was an affair of some dexterity. The less precious goods were hoisted roughly in; the chronometer, after repeated failures, was passed gently and successfully from hand to hand, and there remained only the more difficult business of embarking Huish. Even that piece of dead weight (shipped A. B. at eighteen dollars, and described by the captain to the consul as an invaluable man) was at last hauled on board without mishap, and the doctor, with civil salutations, took his leave.

The three co-adventurers looked at each other, and Davis heaved a breath of relief.

"Now let's get this chronometer fixed," said he, and led the way into the house. It was a fairly spacious place; two staterooms and a good-sized pantry opened from the main cabin. The bulk-heads were painted white, the floor laid with wax-cloth. No litter, no sign of life remained, for the effects of the dead men had been disinfected and conveyed on shore. Only on the table, in a saucer, some sulphur burned, and the fumes set them coughing as they entered. The captain peered into the starboard stateroom, where the bedclothes still lay tumbled in the bunk, the blanket flung back as they had flung it back from the disfigured corpse before its burial.

"Now I told those niggers to tumble that truck overboard," grumbled Davis. "Guess they were afraid to lay hands on it. Well, they've hosed the place out; that's as much as can be expected, I suppose. Huish, lay on to these blankets."

"See you blooming well far enough first," said Huish, drawing back.

"What's that?" snapped the captain. "I'll tell you, my young friend, I think you make a mistake. I'm captain here."

"Fat lot I care," returned the clerk.

"That so?" said Davis. "Then you'll berth forward with the niggers! Walk right out of this cabin."

"Oh, I dessay!" said Huish. "See any green in my eye? A lark's a lark."

"Well, now, I'll explain this business, and you'll see (once for all) just precisely how much lark there is to it," said Davis. "I'm captain, and I'm going to be it. One thing of three. First, you take my orders here as cabin steward, in which case you mess with us. Or, second, you refuse, and I pack you forward, and you get as quick as the word's said. Or, third and last, I'll signal that man-of-war and send you ashore under arrest for mutiny."

"And of course I wouldn't blow the gaff? Oh, no!" replied the jeering Huish.

"And who's to believe you, my son?" inquired the captain. "No *sir!* There ain't no lark about my captainising. Enough said. Up with these blankets."

Huish was no fool,—he knew when he was beaten; and he was no coward, either, for he stepped to the bunk, took the infected bed-clothes fairly in his arms, and carried them out of the house without a check or tremour.

"I was waiting for the chance," said Davis to Herrick. "I needn't do the same with you, because you understand it for yourself."

"Are you going to berth here?" asked Herrick, following the captain into the stateroom, where he began to adjust the chronometer in its place at the bed-head.

"Not much!" replied he. "I guess I'll berth on deck. I don't know as I'm afraid, but I've no immediate use for confluent small-pox."

"I don't know that I'm afraid either," said Herrick. "But the thought of those two men sticks in my throat, — that captain and mate dying here, one opposite to the other. It's grim. I wonder what they said last!"

"Wiseman and Wishart?" said the captain. "Probably mighty small potatoes. That's the thing a fellow figures out for himself one way, and the real business goes quite another. Perhaps Wiseman said, 'Here, old man, fetch up the gin; I'm feeling powerful rocky.' And perhaps Wishart said, 'Oh, hell!'"

"Well, that's grim enough," said Herrick.

"And so it is," said Davis. "There; there's that chronometer fixed. And now it's about time to up anchor and clear out."

He lit a cigar and stepped on deck.

"Here, you! What's *your* name?" he cried to one of the hands, a lean-flanked, clean-built fellow from some far Western island, and of a darkness almost approaching to the African.

"Sally Day," replied the man.

"Devil it is!" said the captain. "Didn't know we had ladies on board. Well, Sally, oblige me by hauling down that rag there. I'll do the same for you another time." He watched the yellow bunting as it was eased past the cross-trees and handed down on deck. "You'll float no more on this ship," he observed. "Muster the people aft, Mr. Hay," he added, speaking unnecessarily loud. "I've a word to say to them."

It was with a singular sensation that Herrick prepared for the first time to address a crew. He thanked his stars, indeed, that they were natives. But even natives, he reflected, might be critics too quick for such a novice as himself; they might perceive some lapse from that precise and cut-and-dry English which prevails on board a ship; it was even possible they understood no other; and he racked his brain, and overhauled his reminiscences of sea romance, for some appropriate words.

"Here, men, tumble aft!" he said at last. "Lively now! All hands aft!"

They crowded in the alleyway like sheep.

"Here they are, sir," said Herrick.

For some time the captain continued to face the stern, then turned with ferocious suddenness on the crew, and seemed to enjoy their shrinking.

"Now," he said, twisting his cigar in his mouth, and toying with the spokes of the wheel, "I'm Captain Brown. I command this ship. This is Mr. Hay, first officer. The other white man is cabin steward, but he'll stand watch and do his trick. My orders shall be obeyed smartly. You savvy, *smartly?* There shall be no growling about the *kaikai,* which will be above allowance. You'll put a handle to the mate's name, and tack on 'sir' to every order I give you. If you're smart and quick, I'll make this ship comfortable for all hands." He took the cigar out of his mouth. "If you're not," he added, in a roaring voice, "I'll make it a floating hell. Now, Mr. Hay, we'll pick watches, if you please."

"All right," said Herrick.

"You will please use 'sir' when you address me, Mr. Hay," said the captain. "I'll take the lady. Step to starboard, Sally." And then he whispered in Herrick's ear: "Take the old man."

"I'll take you there," said Herrick.

"What's your name?" said the captain. "What's that you say? Oh, that's not English; I'll have none of your highway gibberish on my ship. We'll call you old Uncle Ned, because you've got no wool on the top of your head, just the place where the wool ought to grow. Step to port, Uncle. Don't you hear Mr. Hay has picked you? Then I'll take the white man. White Man, step to starboard. Now which of you two is the cook? You? Then Mr. Hay takes your friend in the blue dungaree. Step to port, Dungaree. There! we know who we all are — Dungaree, Uncle Ned, Sally Day, White Man, and Cook. All F.F.V.'s, I guess. And now, Mr. Hay, we'll up anchor, if you please."

"For heaven's sake, tell me some of the words," whispered Herrick.

An hour later the *Farallone* was under all plain sail, the rudder hard a-port, and the cheerfully clanking windlass had brought the anchor home.

"All clear, sir," cried Herrick, from the bow.

The captain met her with the wheel, as she bounded like a stag from her repose, trembling and bending to the puffs. The guard-boat gave a parting hail, the wake whitened and ran out; the *Farallone* was under way.

Her berth had been close to the pass. Even as she forged ahead, Davis slewed her for the channel between the pier ends of the reef, the breakers sounding and whitening to either hand. Straight through the narrow band of blue she shot to seaward, and the captain's heart exulted as he felt her tremble under foot, and (looking back over the taff-rail) beheld the roofs of Papeete changing position on the shore, and the island mountains rearing higher in the wake.

But they were not yet done with the shore and the horror of the yellow flag. About midway of the pass there was a cry and a scurry; a man was seen to leap upon the rail, and, throwing his arms over his head, to stoop and plunge into the sea.

"Steady as she goes," the captain cried, relinquishing the wheel to Huish.

The next moment he was forward, in the midst of the Kanakas, belaying-pin in hand.

"Anybody else for shore?" he cried, and the savage trumpeting of his voice, no less than the ready weapon in his hand, struck fear in all. Stupidly they stared after their escaped companion, whose black head was visible upon the water, steering for the land. And the schooner meanwhile slipped like a racer through the pass, and met the long sea of the open ocean with a souse of spray.

"Fool that I was, not to have a pistol ready!" exclaimed Davis. "Well, we go to sea short-handed; we can't help that. You have a lame watch of it, Mr. Hay."

"I don't see how we are to get along," said Herrick.

"Got to," said the captain. "No more Tahiti for me."

Both turned instinctively and looked astern. The fair island was unfolding, mountain top on mountain top; Eimeo, on the port board, lifted her splintered pinnacles, and still the schooner raced to the open sea.

"Think!" cried the captain, with a gesture, "yesterday morning I danced for my breakfast like a poodle dog."

CHAPTER V

THE CARGO OF CHAMPAGNE

THE ship's head was laid to clear Eimeo to the north, and the captain sat down in the cabin with a chart, a ruler, and an epitome.

"East a half no'the," said he, raising his face from his labours. "Mr. Hay, you'll have to watch her dead reckoning. I want every yard she makes on every hair's breadth of a course. I'm going to knock a hole right straight through the Paumotus, and that's always a near touch. Now, if this southeast trade ever blew out of the southeast, which it don't, we might hope to lie within half a point of our course. Say we lie within a point of it. That'll just about weather Fakarava. Yes, sir, that's what we've got to do, if we tack for it. Brings us through this slush of little islands in the cleanest place; see?" And he showed where his ruler intersected the wide-lying labyrinth of the Dangerous Archipelago. "I wish it was night, and I could put her about right now; we're losing time and easting. Well, we'll do our best. And if we don't fetch Peru, we'll bring up to Ecuador. All one, I guess. Depreciated dollars down, and no questions asked. A remarkable fine institootion, the South American don."

Tahiti was already some way astern, the Diadem rising from among broken mountains; Eimeo was already close aboard, and stood black and strange against the golden splendour of the west, when the captain took his departure from the two islands, and the patent log was set.

Some twenty minutes later, Sally Day, who was continually leaving the wheel to peer in at the cabin clock, announced in a shrill cry "Fo' Bell," and the cook was to be seen carrying the soup into the cabin.

"I guess I'll sit down and have a pick with you," said Davis to Herrick. "By the time I've done, it 'll be dark, and we'll clap the hooker on the wind for South America."

In the cabin, at one corner of the table, immediately below the lamp, and on the lee side of a bottle of champagne, sat Huish.

"What's this? Where did that come from?" asked the captain.

"It's fizz; and it came from the after-'old, if you want to know," said Huish, and drained his mug.

"This'll never do!" exclaimed Davis, the merchant seaman's horror of breaking into cargo showing incongruously forth on board that stolen ship. "There was never any good came of games like that."

"You byby!" said Huish. "A fellow would think (to 'ear him) we were on the square! And look 'ere, you've put this job up 'andsomely for me, 'aven't you? I'm to go on deck and steer while you two sit and guzzle, and I'm to go by a nickname, and got to call you 'sir' and 'mister.' Well, you look here, my bloke; I'll have fizz *ad lib.*, or it won't wash. I tell you that. And you know mighty well you ain't got any man-of-war to signal now."

Davis was staggered. "I'd give fifty dollars this had never happened," he said weakly.

"Well, it *'as* 'appened, you see," returned Huish. "Try some; it's devilish good."

The Rubicon was crossed without another struggle. The captain filled a mug and drank.

"I wish it was beer," he said with a sigh. "But there's no denying it's the genuine stuff, and cheap at the money. Now, Huish, you clear out and take your wheel."

The little wretch had gained a point, and he was gay. "Ay, ay, sir," said he, and left the others to their meal.

"Pea soup!" exclaimed the captain. "Blamed if I thought I should taste pea soup again!"

Herrick sat inert and silent. It was impossible, after these months of hopeless want, to smell the rough, high-spiced sea victuals without lust, and his mouth watered with desire of the champagne. It was no less impossible to have assisted at the scene between Huish and the captain, and not to perceive, with sudden bluntness, the gulf wherein he had fallen. He was a thief among thieves. He said it to himself. He could not touch the soup. If he had moved at all, it must have been to leave the table, throw himself overboard, and drown — an honest man.

"Here," said the captain, "you look sick, old man; have a drop of this."

The champagne creamed and bubbled in the mug; its bright color, its lively effervescence seized his eye. "It is too late to hesitate," he thought. His hand took the mug instinctively; he drank, with unquenchable pleasure and desire of more; drained the vessel dry, and set it down with sparkling eyes.

"There is something in life after all!" he cried. "I had forgot what it was like. Yes, even this is worth while. Wine, food, dry clothes — why, they're worth dying, worth hanging for! Captain, tell me one thing: why aren't all the poor folk foot-pads?"

"Give it up," said the captain.

"They must be damned good," cried Herrick. "There's something here beyond me. Think of that calaboose! Suppose we were sent suddenly back!" He shuddered as though stung by a convulsion, and buried his face in his clutching hands.

"Here, what's wrong with you?" cried the captain. There was no reply; only Herrick's shoulders heaved so that the table was shaken. "Take some more of this. Here, drink this. I order you to! Don't start crying when you're out of the wood."

"I'm not crying," said Herrick, raising his face and showing his dry eyes. "It's worse than crying. It's the horror of that grave that we've escaped from."

"Come, now, you tackle your soup; that'll fix you," said Davis, kindly. "I told you you were all broken up. You couldn't have stood out another week."

"That's the dreadful part of it!" cried Herrick. "Another week, and I'd have murdered some one for a dollar! God! and I know that? And I'm still living? It's some beastly dream."

"Quietly, quietly! Quietly does it, my son. Take your pea soup. Food — that's what you want," said Davis.

The soup strengthened and quieted Herrick's nerves;

another glass of wine, and a piece of pickled pork and fried banana completed what the soup began, and he was able once more to look the captain in the face.

"I didn't know I was so much run down," he said.

"Well," said Davis, "you were as steady as a rock all day; now you've had a little lunch, you'll be as steady as a rock again."

"Yes," was the reply, "I'm steady enough now, but I'm a queer kind of a first officer."

"Shucks!" cried the captain. "You've only got to mind the ship's course, and keep your slate to half a point. A babby could do that; let alone a college graduate like you. There ain't nothing *to* sailoring, when you come to look it in the face. And now we'll go and put her about. Bring the slate; we'll have to start our dead reckoning right away."

The distance run since the departure was read off the log by the binnacle light, and entered on the slate.

"Ready about," said the captain. "Give me the wheel, White Man, and you stand by the mainsheet. Boom tackle, Mr. Hay, please, and then you can jump forward and attend head-sails."

"Ay, ay, sir," responded Herrick.

"All clear forward?" asked Davis.

"All clear, sir."

"Hard a-lee!" cried the captain. "Haul in your slack as she comes," he called to Huish. "Haul in your slack; put your back into it; keep your feet out of the coils." A sudden blow sent Huish flat along the deck, and the captain was in his place. "Pick yourself up and keep the wheel hard over!" he roared. "You wooden fool, you wanted to get killed, I guess. Draw the jib," he cried a moment later; and then to Huish, "Give me the wheel again, and see if you can coil that sheet."

But Huish stood and looked at Davis with an evil countenance. "Do you know you struck me?" said he.

"Do you know I saved your life?" returned the other, not deigning to look at him; his eyes travelling, instead, between the compass and the sails. "Where would you have been if that boom had swung out and you bundled in the slack? No, *sir;* we'll have no more of you at the mainsheet. Seaport towns are full of mainsheet-men; they hop upon one leg, my son, what's left of them, and the rest are dead. (Set your boom tackle, Mr. Hay.) Struck you, did I? Lucky for you I did."

"Well," said Huish, slowly, "I dessay there may be somethink in that. 'Ope there is." He turned his back elaborately on the captain, and entered the house, where the speedy explosion of a champagne cork showed he was attending to his comfort.

Herrick came aft to the captain. "How is she doing now?" he asked.

"East and by no'the a half no'the," said Davis. "It's about as good as I expected."

"What'll the hands think of it?" said Herrick.

"Oh, they don't think. They ain't paid to," said the captain.

"There was something wrong, was there not, between you and——" Herrick paused.

"That's a nasty little beast; that's a biter," replied the captain, shaking his head. "But so long as you and me hang in, it don't matter."

Herrick lay down in the weather alleyway; the night was cloudless; the movement of the ship cradled him; he was oppressed, besides, by the first generous meal after so long a time of famine, and he was recalled from deep sleep by the voice of Davis singing out: "Eight bells!"

He rose stupidly and staggered aft, where the captain gave him the wheel.

"By the wind," said the captain. "It comes a little puffy; when you get a heavy puff, steal all you can to windward, but keep her a good full."

He stepped towards the house, paused, and hailed the forecastle. "Got such a thing as a concertina forward?" said he. "Bully for you, Uncle Ned. Fetch it aft, will you?"

The schooner steered very easy; and Herrick, watching the moon-whitened sails, was overpowered by drowsiness. A sharp report from the cabin startled him; a third bottle had been opened; and Herrick remembered the *Sea Ranger* and Fourteen Island Group. Presently the notes of the accordion sounded, and then the captain's voice:

"O honey, with our pockets full of money,
We will trip, trip, trip, we will trip it on the quay;
And I will dance with Kate, and Tom will dance with Sall,
When we're all back from South Amerikee."

So it went to its quaint air; and the watch below lingered and listened by the forward door, and Uncle Ned was to be seen in the moonlight nodding time, and Herrick smiled at the wheel, his anxieties awhile forgotten. Song followed song; another cork exploded; there were voices raised, as though the pair in the cabin were in disagreement; and presently it seemed the breach was healed, for it was now the voice of Huish that struck up, to the captain's accompaniment:—

"Up in a balloon, boys,
Up in a balloon,
Up among the little stars,
All around the moon."

A wave of nausea overcame Herrick at the wheel. He wondered why the air, the words (which were yet written with a certain knack), and the voice and accent of the singer, should all jar his spirit like a file on a man's teeth. He sickened at the thought of his two comrades drinking away their reason upon stolen wine, quarrelling and hiccupping and making up, while the doors of a prison yawned for them in the near future. "Shall I have sold my honour for nothing?" he thought; and a heat of rage and resolution glowed in his bosom,—rage against his comrades, resolution to carry through this business if it might be carried; pluck profit out of shame, since the shame at least was now inevitable; and come home, home from South America—how did the song go?—"with his pockets full of money."

"O honey, with our pockets full of money,
We will trip, trip, trip, we will trip it on the quay:"—

so the words ran in his head, and the "honey" took on visible form; the quay rose before him, and he knew it for the lamplit Embankment, and he saw the lights of Battersea bridge bestride the sullen river. All through the remainder of his trick he stood entranced, review-ing the past. He had been always true to his love, but not always sedulous to recall her. In the growing calamity of his life, she had swum more distant, like the moon in mist. The letter of farewell, the dishonourable hope that had surprised and corrupted him in his distress, the changed scene, the sea, the night, and the music,—all stirred him to the roots of manhood. "I *will* win her," he thought, and ground his teeth. "Fair or foul, what matters if I win her?"

"Fo' bell, matey. I think um fo' bell." He was suddenly recalled by these words in the voice of Uncle Ned.

"Look in at the clock, Uncle," said he. He would not look himself from horror of the tipplers.

"Him past, matey," repeated the Hawaiian.

"So much the better for you, Uncle," he replied; and he gave up the wheel, repeating the directions as he had received them.

He took two steps forward, and remembered his dead reckoning. "How has she been heading?" he thought; and he flushed from head to foot. He had not observed, or had forgotten; here was the old incompetence; the slate must be filled up by guess. "Never again!" he vowed to himself in silent fury, "never again. It shall be no fault of mine if this miscarry." And for the remainder of his watch he stood close by Uncle Ned, and read the face of the compass as, perhaps, he had never read a letter from his sweetheart.

All the time, and spurring him to the more attention, song, loud talk, fleering laughter, and the occasional popping of a cork reached his ears from the interior of the house; and when the port watch was relieved at midnight, Huish and the captain appeared upon the quarter-deck with flushed faces and uneven steps, the former laden with bottles, the latter with the two tin mugs. Herrick silently passed them by. They hailed him in thick voices; he made no answer. They cursed him for a churl; he paid no heed, although his belly quivered with disgust and rage. He closed to the door of the house behind him, and cast himself on a locker in the cabin — not to sleep, he thought; rather to think and to despair. Yet he had scarce turned twice on his uneasy bed before a drunken voice hailed him in the ear, and he must go on deck again to stand the morning watch.

The first evening set the model for those that were to follow. Two cases of champagne scarce lasted the four and twenty hours, and almost the whole was drunk by Huish and the captain. Huish seemed to thrive on the excess. He was never sober, yet never wholly tipsy; the food and the sea air had soon healed him of his disease, and he began to lay on flesh. But with Davis things went worse. In the drooping, unbuttoned figure that sprawled all day upon the lockers, tippling and reading novels, in the fool who made of the evening watch a public carouse on the quarter-deck, it would have been hard to recognise the vigorous seaman of Papeete roads. He kept himself reasonably well in hand till he had taken the sun and yawned and blotted through his calculations; but, from the moment he rolled up the chart, his hours were passed in slavish self-indulgence or in hoggish slumber. Every other branch of his duty was neglected, except maintaining a stern discipline about the dinner table. Again and again, Herrick would hear the cook called aft, and see him running with fresh tins, or carrying away again a meal that had been totally condemned. And the more the captain became sunk in drunkenness, the more delicate his palate showed itself. Once (in the forenoon) he had a bo'sun's chair rigged over the rail, stripped to his trousers, and went overboard with a pot of paint. "I don't like the way this schooner's painted," said he, "and I'll take a turn upon her name." But he tired of it in half an hour, and the schooner went on her way with an incongruous patch of colour on the stern, and the word "Farallone" part obliterated and part looking through. He refused to stand either the middle or the morning watch. It was fine-weather sailing, he said; and asked, with a laugh, "Who ever heard of the old man standing watch himself?" To the dead reckoning, which Herrick still tried to keep, he would pay not the least attention nor afford the least assistance.

"What do we want of dead reckoning?" he asked. "We get the sun all right, don't we?"

"We mayn't get it always, though," objected Herrick. "And you told me yourself you weren't sure of the chronometer."

"Oh, there ain't no flies on the chronometer!" cried Davis.

"Oblige me so far, captain," said Herrick, stiffly. "I am anxious to keep this reckoning, which is a part of my duty. I do not know what to allow for current, nor how to allow for it. I am too inexperienced, and I beg of you to help me."

"Never discourage zealous officer," said the captain, unrolling the chart again, for Herrick had taken him over his day's work, and while he was still partly sober.

"Here it is; look for yourself; anything from the west-no'the-west, and anyways from five to twenty-five miles. That's what the A'm'ralty chart says. I guess you don't expect to get ahead of your own Britishers?"

"I am trying to do my duty, Captain Brown," said Herrick, with a dark flush; "and I have the honour to inform you that I don't enjoy being trifled with."

"What in thunder do you want?" roared Davis. "Go and look at the blamed wake. If you're trying to do your duty, why don't you go and do it? I guess it's no business of mine to go and stick my head over the ship's rump. I guess it's yours. And I'll tell you what it is, my fine fellow, I'll trouble you not to come the dude over me. You're insolent; that's what's wrong with you. Don't you crowd me, Mr. Herrick, Esquire."

Herrick tore up his papers, threw them on the floor, and left the cabin.

"He's turned a bloomin' swot, ain't he?" sneered Huish.

"He thinks himself too good for his company; that's what ails Herrick, Esquire," raged the captain. "He thinks I don't understand when he comes the heavy swell. Won't sit down with us, won't he? Won't say a civil word? I'll serve the son of a gun as he deserves. By God, Huish, I'll show him whether he's too good for John Davis!"

"Easy with the names, Cap'," said Huish, who was always the more sober. "Easy over the stones, my boy!"

"All right, I will. You're a good sort, Huish. I didn't take to you at first, but I guess you're right enough. Le's open another bottle," said the captain; and that day, perhaps because he was excited by the quarrel, he drank more recklessly, and by four o'clock was stretched insensible upon the locker.

Herrick and Huish supped alone, one after the other, opposite his flushed and snorting body. And if the sight killed Herrick's hunger, the isolation weighed so heavily on the clerk's spirit that he was scarce risen from table ere he was currying favour with his former comrade.

Herrick was at the wheel when he approached, and Huish leaned confidentially across the binnacle.

"I say, old chappie," he said, "you and me don't seem to be such pals, somehow."

Herrick gave her a spoke or two in silence; his eye, as it skirted from the needle to the luff of the foresail, passed the man by without speculation. But Huish was really dull, a thing he could support with difficulty, having no resources of his own. The idea of a private talk with Herrick, at this stage of their relations, held out particular inducements to a person of his character. Drink, besides, as it renders some men hyper-sensitive, made Huish callous; and it would almost have required a blow to make him quit his purpose.

"Pretty business, ain't it?" he continued. "Dyvis on the lush! Must say I thought you gave it 'im A-one to-day. He didn't like it a bit; took on hawful after you were gone. ''Ere,' says I, ''old on; easy on the lush,' I says. ''Errick was right, and you know it. Give 'im a chanst,' I says. ''Uish,' sezee, 'don't you gimme no more of your jaw, or I'll knock your bloomin' eyes out.' Well, wot can I do, 'Errick? But I tell you, I don't 'arf like it. It looks to me like the *Sea Rynger* over again."

Still Herrick was silent.

"Do you 'ear me speak?" asked Huish, sharply. "You're pleasant, ain't you?"

"Stand away from that binnacle," said Herrick.

The clerk looked at him, long and straight and black; his figure seemed to writhe like that of a snake about to strike; then he turned on his heel, went back to the cabin, and opened a bottle of champagne. When eight bells were cried, he slept on the floor beside the captain on the locker; and of the whole starboard watch, only Sally Day appeared upon the summons. The mate proposed to stand the watch with him, and let Uncle Ned lie down. It would make twelve hours on deck, and probably sixteen; but in this fair-weather sailing, he might safely sleep between his tricks of wheel, leaving orders to be called on any sign of squalls. So far he could trust the men, between whom and himself a close relation had sprung up. With Uncle Ned he held long nocturnal conversations, and the old man told him his simple and hard story of exile, suffering, and injustice among cruel whites. The cook, when he found Herrick messed alone, produced for him unexpected and sometimes unpalatable dainties, of which he forced himself to eat. And one day, when he was forward, he was surprised to feel a caressing hand run down his shoulder, and to hear the voice of Sally Day crooning in his ear: "You gootch man!" He turned, and, choking down a sob, shook hands with the negrito. They were kindly, cheery, childish souls. Upon the Sunday each brought forth his separate Bible; for they were all men of alien speech, even to each other, and Sally Day communicated with his mates in English only. Each read, or made believe to read, his chapter, Uncle Ned with spectacles on nose, and they would all join together in the singing of missionary hymns. It was thus a cutting reproof to compare the islanders and the whites aboard the *Farallone.* Shame ran in Herrick's blood to remember what employment he was on, and to see these poor souls — and even Sally Day, the child of cannibals, in all likelihood a cannibal himself — so faithful to what they knew of good. The fact that he was held in grateful favour by these innocents served like blinders to his conscience, and there were times when he was inclined, with Sally Day, to call himself a good man. But the height of his favour was only now to appear. With one voice the crew protested. Ere Herrick knew what they were doing, the cook was aroused, and came a willing volunteer; all hands clustered about their mate with expostulations and caresses, and he was bidden to lie down and take his customary rest without alarm.

"He tell you tlue," said Uncle Ned. "You sleep. Evely man hea he do all light. Evely man he like you too much."

Herrick struggled — choked upon some trivial words of gratitude — and walked to the side of the house, against which he leaned, struggling with emotion.

Uncle Ned presently followed him, and begged him to lie down.

"It's no use, Uncle Ned," he replied. "I couldn't sleep. I'm knocked over with all your goodness."

"Ah, no call me Uncle Ned no mo'!" cried the old man. "No my name! My name Taveeta, all-e-same

Taveeta, King of Islael. Wat for he call that Hawaii? I think no savvy nothing — all-e-same Wise-a-mana."

It was the first time the name of the late captain had been mentioned, and Herrick grasped the occasion. The reader shall be spared Uncle Ned's unwieldy dialect, and learn, in less embarrassing English, the sum of what he now communicated. The ship had scarce cleared the Golden Gate before the captain and mate had entered on a career of drunkenness, which was scarcely interrupted by their malady, and only closed by death. For days and weeks they had encountered neither land nor ship; and, seeing themselves lost on the huge deep with their insane conductors, the natives had drunk deep of terror.

At length they made a low island, and went in; and Wiseman and Wishart landed in the boat. There was a great village, a very fine village, and plenty Kanakas in that place, but all mighty serious; and, from every here and there in the back parts of the settlement, Taveeta heard the sounds of island lamentation. "I no savvy *talk* that island," said he. "I savvy hear um *cly*. I think, Hum! too many people die here!" But upon Wiseman and Wishart the significance of that barbaric keening was lost. Full of bread and drink, they rollicked along, unconcerned; embraced the girls, who had scarce energy to repel them; took up and joined (with drunken voices) in the death wail; and at last (on what they took to be an invitation) entered under the roof of a house in which was a considerable concourse of people sitting silent. They stooped below the eaves, flushed and laughing; within a minute they came forth again with changed faces and silenced tongues; and, as the press severed to make way for them, Taveeta was able to perceive, in the deep shadow of the house, the sick man raising from his mat a head already defeatured by disease. The two tragic triflers fled, without hesitation, for their boat, screaming on Taveeta to make haste. They came aboard with all speed of oars, raised anchor, and crowded sail upon the ship with blows and curses, and were at sea again — and again drunk — before sunset. A week after, and the last of the two had been committed to the deep. Herrick asked Taveeta where that island was, and he replied that, by what he gathered of folks' talk as they went up together from the beach, he supposed it must be one of the Paumotus. This was in itself probable enough, for the Dangerous Archipelago had been swept that year from east to west by devastating small-pox; but Herrick thought it a strange course to lie for Sydney. Then he remembered the drink.

"Were they not surprised when they made the island?" he asked.

"Wise-a-mana he say, 'Dam! what this?'" was the reply.

"Oh, that's it, then," said Herrick. "I don't believe they knew where they were."

"I tink so, too," said Uncle Ned. "I tink no savvy. This one mo' betta," he added, pointing to the house where the drunken captain slumbered. "Take-a-sun all-e-same."

The implied last touch completed Herrick's picture of the life and death of his two predecessors; of their prolonged, sordid, sodden sensuality as they sailed, they knew not whither, on their last cruise. He held but a twinkling and unsure belief in any future state; the thought of one of punishment, he derided; yet for him (as for all) there dwelt a horror about the end of the brutish man. Sickness fell upon him at the image thus called up; and when he compared it with the scene in which himself was acting, and considered the doom that seemed to brood upon the schooner, a horror that was almost superstitious fell upon him. And yet the strange thing was, he did not falter. He who had proved his incapacity in so many fields, being now falsely placed amid duties which he did not understand, without help, and, it might be said, without countenance, had hitherto surpassed expectation; and even the shameful misconduct and shocking disclosures of that night served but to nerve and strengthen him. He had sold his honour; he vowed it should not be in vain. "It shall be no fault of mine if this miscarry," he repeated. And in his heart he wondered at himself. Living rage, no doubt, supported him; no doubt, also, the sense of the last cast, of the ships burned, of all doors closed but one, which is so strong a tonic to the merely weak, and so deadly a depressant to the merely cowardly.

For some time the voyage went otherwise well. They weathered Fakarava with one board; and, the wind holding well to the southward and blowing fresh, they passed between Ranaka and Ratiu, and ran some days, north-east by east half east, under the lee of Takume and Hondem, neither of which they made. In about fourteen south and between one hundred and thirty-four and one hundred and thirty-five west, it fell a dead calm, with rather a heavy sea. The captain refused to take in sail; the helm was lashed, no watch was set, and the

Farallone rolled and banged for three days, according to observation, in almost the same place. The fourth morning, a little before day, a breeze sprang up and rapidly freshened. The captain had drunk hard the night before; he was far from sober when he was roused; and when he came on deck for the first time, at half past eight, it was plain he had already drunk deep again at breakfast. Herrick avoided his eye, and resigned the deck, with indignation, to a man more than half seas over. By the loud commands of the captain and the singing out of fellows at the ropes, he could judge from the house that sail was being crowded on the ship; relinquished his half-eaten breakfast, and came on deck again, to find the main and the jib topsails set, and both watches and the cook turned out to hand the stay-sail. The *Farallone* lay already far over; the sky was obscured with misty scud; and from the windward an ominous squall came flying up, broadening and blackening as it rose.

Fear thrilled in Herrick's vitals. He saw death hard by, and, if not death, sure ruin; for if the *Farallone* lived through the coming squall, she must surely be dismasted. With that, their enterprise was at an end, and they themselves bound prisoners to the very evidence of their crime. The greatness of the peril and his own alarm sufficed to silence him. Pride, wrath, and shame raged without issue in his mind, and he shut his teeth and folded his arms close.

The captain sat in the boat to windward, bellowing orders and insults, his eyes glazed, his face deeply congested, a bottle set between his knees, a glass in his hand, half empty. His back was to the squall, and he was at first intent upon the setting of the sail. When that was done, and the great trapezium of canvas had begun to draw and to trail the lee-rail of the *Farallone* level with the foam, he laughed out an empty laugh, drained his glass, sprawled back among the lumber in the boat, and fetched out a crumpled novel.

Herrick watched him, and his indignation glowed red-hot. He glanced to windward, where the squall already whitened the near sea, and already heralded its coming with a singular and dismal sound. He glanced at the steersman, and saw him clinging to the spokes with a face of a sickly blue. He saw the crew were running to their stations without orders, and it seemed as if something broke in his brain; and the passion of anger, so long restrained, so long eaten in secret, burst suddenly loose, and filled and shook him like a sail. He stepped across to the captain, and smote his hand heavily on the drunkard's shoulder.

"You brute," he said, in a voice that tottered, "look behind you!"

"Wha's that?" cried Davis, bounding in the boat and upsetting the champagne.

"You lost the *Sea Ranger* because you were a drunken sot," said Herrick. "Now you're going to lose the *Farallone*. You're going to drown here the same way as you drowned others, and be damned. And your daughter shall walk the streets, and your sons be thieves like their father."

For the moment, the words struck the captain white and foolish. "My God!" he cried, looking at Herrick as upon a ghost; "my God, Herrick!"

"Look behind you, then!" reiterated the assailant.

The wretched man, already partly sobered, did as he was told, and in the same breath of time leaped to his feet. "Down staysail!" he trumpeted. The hands were thrilling for the order, and the great sail came with a run, and fell half overboard among the racing foam. "Jib topsail halyards! Let the stays'l be," he said again.

But before it was well uttered, the squall shouted aloud and fell, in a solid mass of wind and rain commingled on the *Farallone*, and she stooped under the blow, and lay like a thing dead. From the mind of Herrick reason fled; he clung in the weather rigging, exulting; he was done with life, and he gloried in the release; he gloried in the wild noises of the wind and the choking onslaught of the rain; he gloried to die so, and now, amid this coil of the elements. And meanwhile, in the waist, up to his knees in water, — so low the schooner lay, — the captain was hacking at the foresheet with a pocket-knife. It was a question of seconds, for the *Farallone* drank deep of the encroaching seas. But the hand of the captain had the advance. The foresail boom tore apart the last strands of the sheet, and crashed to leeward; the *Farallone* leaped up into the wind and righted; and the peak and throat halyards, which had long been let go, began to run at the same instant.

For some ten minutes more she careered under the impulse of the squall; but the captain was now master of himself and of his ship, and all danger at an end. And then, sudden as a trick-change upon the stage, the squall blew by, the wind dropped into light airs, the sun beamed forth again upon the tattered schooner; and the captain, having secured the foresail boom, and set a couple of hands to the pump, walked aft, sober, a little pale, and with the sodden end of a cigar still stuck between his teeth, even as the squall had found it. Herrick followed him. He could scarce recall the violence of his late emotions, but he felt there was a scene to go through, and he was anxious and even eager to go through with it.

The captain, turning at the house end, met him face to face, and averted his eyes. "We've lost the two tops'ls and the stays'l," he gabbled. "Good business we did n't lose any sticks. I guess you think we're all the better without the kites."

"That's not what I'm thinking," said Herrick, in a voice strangely quiet, that yet echoed confusion in the captain's mind.

"I know that," he cried, holding up his hand. "I know what you're thinking. No use to say it now. I'm sober."

"I have to say it, though," returned Herrick.

"Hold on, Herrick; you've said enough," said Davis. "You've said what I would take from no man breathing but yourself; only I know it's true."

"I have to tell you, Captain Brown," pursued Herrick, "that I resign my position as mate. You can put me in irons or shoot me, as you please. I will make no resistance; only I decline in any way to help or to obey you; and I suggest you should put Mr. Huish in my place. He will make a worthy first officer to your captain, sir." He smiled, bowed, and turned to walk forward.

"Where are you going, Herrick?" cried the captain, detaining him by the shoulder.

"To berth forward with the men, sir," replied Herrick, with the same hateful smile. "I've been long enough aft here with you — gentlemen."

"You're wrong there," said Davis. "Don't you be too quick with me; there ain't nothing wrong but the drink — it's the old story, man! Let me get sober once, and then you'll see," he pleaded.

"Excuse me, I desire to see no more of you," said Herrick.

The captain groaned aloud. "You know what you said about my children?" he broke out.

"By rote. In case you wish me to say it to you again?" asked Herrick.

"Don't!" cried the captain, clapping his hands to his ears. "Don't make me kill a man I care for! Herrick, if you see me put a glass to my lips again till we're ashore, I give you leave to put a bullet through me. I beg you to do it! You're the only man aboard whose carcass is worth losing. Do you think I don't know that? Do you think I ever went back on you? I always knew that you were in the right of it; drunk or sober, I knew that. What do you want? An oath? Man, you're clever enough to see that this is sure-enough earnest."

"Do you mean there shall be no more drinking," asked Herrick; "neither by you nor Huish? That you won't go on stealing my profits and drinking my champagne, that I gave my honour for? And that you'll attend to your duties, and stand watch and watch, and bear your proper share of the ship's work, instead of leaving it all on the shoulders of a landsman, and making yourself the butt and scoff of native seamen? Is that what you mean? If it is, be so good as to say it categorically."

"You put these things in a way hard for a gentleman to swallow," said the captain. "You would n't have me say I was ashamed of myself? Trust me this once! I'll do the square thing; and there's my hand on it."

"Well, I'll try it once," said Herrick. "Fail me again ——"

"No more now!" interrupted Davis. "No more, old man! Enough said. You've a riling tongue when your back's up, Herrick. Just be glad we're friends again, the same as what I am, and go tender on the raws. I'll see as you don't repent it. We've been mighty near death this day,— don't say whose fault it was! — pretty near hell too, I guess. We're in a mighty bad line of life, us two, and ought to go easy with each other."

He was maundering; yet it seemed as if he were maundering with some design, beating about the bush of some communication that he feared to make, or perhaps only talking against time, in terror of what Herrick might say next. But Herrick had now spat his venom. His was a kindly nature, and, content with his triumph, he had now begun to pity. With a few soothing words he sought to conclude the interview, and proposed that they should change their clothes.

"Not right yet," said Davis. "There's another thing I want to tell you first. You know what you said about my children? I want to tell you why it hit me so hard; I kind of think you'll feel bad about it too. It's about my little Adar. You hadn't ought to have quite said that — but of course I know you didn't know. She — she's dead, you see."

"Why, Davis!" cried Herrick. "You've told me a dozen times she was alive! Clear your head, man! This must be the drink."

"No, *sir,*" said Davis. "She's dead, right enough. Died of a bowel complaint. That was when I was away in the brig *Oregon.* She lies in Portland, Maine. 'Adar, only daughter of Captain John Davis and Mariar his wife, aged five.' I had a doll for her on board. I never took the paper off'n that doll, Herrick; it went down the way it was, with the *Sea Ranger,* that day I was damned."

The captain's eyes were fixed on the horizon; he talked with an extraordinary softness, but a complete composure; and Herrick looked upon him with something that was almost terror.

"Don't think I'm crazy, neither," resumed Davis. "I've all the cold sense that I know what to do with. But I guess a man that's unhappy's like a child; and this is a kind of a child's game of mine. I never could act up to the plain-out truth, you see. So I pretend. And I warn you square: as soon as we're through with this talk, I'll start in again with the pretending. Only, you see, she can't walk no streets," added the captain; "couldn't even make out to live and get that doll!"

Herrick laid a tremulous hand upon the captain's shoulder.

"Don't do that!" cried Davis, recoiling from the touch. "Can't you see I'm all broken up the way it is? Come along, then; come along, old man. You can put your trust in me right through. Come along and get dry clothes."

They entered the cabin, and there was Huish on his knees, prising open a case of champagne.

"Vast, there!" cried the captain. "No more of that. No more drinking on this ship."

"Turned teetotal, 'ave you?" inquired Huish. "I'm agreeable. About time, eh? Bloomin' nearly lost another ship, I fancy." He took out a bottle, and began calmly to burst the wire with the spike of a corkscrew.

"Do you hear me speak?" cried Davis.

"I suppose I do. You speak loud enough," said Huish. "The trouble is that I don't care."

Herrick plucked the captain's sleeve. "Let him be now," said he; "we've had all we want this evening."

"Let him have it, then," said the captain. "It's his last."

By this time the wire was open, the string was cut, the head of gilded paper was torn away, and Huish waited, mug in hand, expecting the usual explosion. It did not follow. He eased the cork with his thumb; still there was no result. At last he took the screw and drew it. It came out very easy and with scarce a sound.

"'Illo!" said Huish, "'ere's a bad bottle."

He poured some of the wine into the mug; it was colourless and still. He smelt and tasted it.

"W'y, wot's this?" he said. "It's water!"

If the voice of trumpets had suddenly sounded about the ship in the midst of the sea, the three men in the house could scarce have been more stunned than by this incident. The mug passed round; each sipped, each smelt of it; each stared at the bottle, in its glory of gold paper, as Crusoe may have stared at the footprint; and their minds were swift to fix upon a common apprehension. The difference between a bottle of champagne and a bottle of water is not great; between a shipload of one or of the other lay the whole scale from riches to ruin.

A second bottle was broached. There were two cases standing ready in a stateroom. These two were brought out, broken open and tested; still with the same result: the contents were still colourless and tasteless, and dead as the rain in a beached fishing-boat.

"Crikey!" said Huish.

"Here, let's sample the hold!" said the captain, mopping his brow with a back-handed sweep; and the three stalked out of the house, grim and heavy-footed.

All hands were turned out: two Kanakas were sent below, another stationed at a purchase, and Davis, axe in hand, took his place beside the coaming.

"Are you going to let the men know?" whispered Herrick.

"Damn the men!" said Davis. "It's beyond that. We've got to know ourselves."

Three cases were sent on deck and sampled in turn; from each bottle, as the captain smashed it with the axe, the champagne ran bubbling and creaming.

"Go deeper, can't you?" cried Davis to the Kanakas in the hold.

The command gave the signal for a disastrous change. Case after case came up, bottle after bottle was burst, and bled mere water. Deeper yet, and they came upon a layer where there was scarcely so much as the intention to deceive,— where the cases were no longer branded, the bottles no longer wired or papered; where the fraud was manifest, and stared them in the face.

"Here's about enough of this foolery!" said Davis. "Stow back the cases in the hold, Uncle, and get the broken crockery overboard. Come with me," he added to his co-adventurers, and led the way back into the cabin.

CHAPTER VI

THE PARTNERS

EACH took a side of the fixed table. It was the first time they had sat down at it together; but now all sense of incongruity, all memory of differences, was quite swept away by the presence of common ruin.

"Gentlemen," said the captain, after a pause, and with very much the air of a chairman opening a board-meeting, "we're sold."

Huish broke out in laughter. "Well, if this ain't the 'ighest old rig!" he cried. "And Davis 'ere, who thought he had got up so bloomin' early in the mornin'! We've stolen a cargo of spring water! Oh, my crikey!" and he squirmed with mirth.

The captain managed to screw out a phantom smile. "Here's Old Man Destiny again," said he to Herrick; "but this time I guess he's kicked the door right in."

Herrick only shook his head.

"Oh, Lord, it's rich!" laughed Huish. "It would really be a scrumptious lark if it 'ad 'appened to somebody else. And wot are we to do next? Oh, my eye! with this bloomin' schooner, too."

"That's the trouble," said Davis. "There's only one thing certain: it's no use carting this old glass and ballast to Peru. No, *sir,* we're in a hole."

"Oh, my! and the merchant!" cried Huish; "the man that made this shipment! He'll get the news by the mail brigantine, and he'll think of course we're making straight for Sydney."

"Yes, he'll be a sick merchant," said the captain. "One thing: this explains the Kanaka crew. If you're going to lose a ship, I would ask no better myself than a Kanaka crew. But there's one thing it don't explain; it don't explain why she came down Tahiti ways."

"W'y, to lose her, you byby!" said Huish.

"A lot you know," said the captain. "Nobody wants to lose a schooner; they want to lose her *on her course,* you skeesicks! You seem to think underwriters haven't got enough sense to come in out of the rain."

"Well," said Herrick, "I can tell you, I am afraid, why she came so far to the eastward. I had it of Uncle Ned. It seems these two unhappy devils, Wiseman and Wishart, were drunk on the champagne from the beginning, and died drunk at the end."

The captain looked on the table.

"They lay in their two bunks, or sat here in this damned house," he pursued, with rising agitation, "filling their skins with the accursed stuff, till sickness took them. As they sickened, and the fever rose, they drank the more. They lay here howling and groaning, drunk and dying, all in one. They didn't know where they were; they didn't care. They didn't even take the sun, it seems."

"Not take the sun!" cried the captain, looking up. "Sacred Billy! what a crowd!"

"Well, it don't matter to Joe!" said Huish. "Wot are Wiseman and the t'other buffer to us?"

"A good deal, too," said the captain. "We're their heirs, I guess."

"It is a great inheritance," said Herrick.

"Well, I don't know about that," returned Davis. "Appears to me as if it might be worse. 'T ain't what the cargo would have been, of course; at least, not money down. But I'll tell you what it appears to figure up to. Appears to me as if it amounted to about the bottom dollar of the man in 'Frisco."

"'Old on," said Huish. "Give a fellow time. 'Ow's this, umpire?"

"Well, my sons," pursued the captain, who seemed to have recovered his assurance, "Wiseman and Wishart were to be paid for casting away this old schooner and its cargo. We're going to cast away the schooner right enough, and I'll make it my private business to see that we get paid. What were W. and W. to get? That's more'n I can tell. But W. and W. went into this business themselves; they were on the crook. Now *we're* on the square; *we* only stumbled into it; and that merchant has just got to squeal, and I'm the man to see that he squeals good. No, *sir!* there's some stuffing to this *Farallone* racket, after all."

"Go it, Cap!" cried Huish. "Yoicks! Forrard! 'Old 'ard! There's your style for the money! Blow me if I don't prefer this to the hother."

"I do not understand," said Herrick. "I have to ask you to excuse me; I do not understand."

"Well, now, see here, Herrick," said Davis. "I'm going to have a word with you, any way, upon a different matter, and it's good that Huish should hear it too. We're done with this boozing business, and we ask your pardon for it right here and now. We have to thank you for all you did for us while we were making hogs of ourselves. You'll find me turn to all right in future; and as for the wine, which I grant we stole from you, I'll take stock and see you paid for it. That's good enough, I believe. But what I want to point out to you is this. The old game was a risky game. The new game's as safe as running a Vienna bakery. We just put this *Farallone* before the wind, and run till we're well to leeward of our port of departure, and reasonably well up with some other place where they have an American consul. Down goes the *Farallone*, and good-by to her! A day or so in the boat; the consul packs us home, at Uncle Sam's expense, to 'Frisco; and if that merchant don't put the dollars down, you come to me!"

"But I thought—" began Herrick; and then broke out, "Oh, let's get on to Peru!"

"Well, if you're going to Peru for your health, I won't say no," replied the captain. "But for what other blame' shadow of a reason you should want to go there, gets me clear. We don't want to go there with this cargo. I don't know as old bottles is a lively article anywheres; leastways I'll go my bottom cent it ain't in Peru. It was always a doubt if we could sell the schooner; I never rightly hoped to, and now I'm sure she ain't worth a hill of beans. What's wrong with her, I don't know. I only know it's something, or she wouldn't be here with this truck in her inside. Then, again, if we lose her, and land in Peru, where are we? We can't declare the loss, or how did we get to Peru? In that case the merchant can't touch the insurance; most likely he'll go bust; and don't you think you see the three of us on the beach of Callao?"

"There's no extradition there," said Herrick.

"Well, my son, and we want to be extradished," said the captain. "What's our point? We want to have a consul extradish us as far as San Francisco and that merchant's office door. My idea is that Samoa would be found an eligible business centre. It's dead before the wind; the States have a consul there, and 'Frisco steamers call, so's we could skip right back and interview the merchant."

"Samoa?" said Herrick. "It will take us forever to get there."

"Oh, with a fair wind!" said the captain.

"No trouble about the log, eh?" asked Huish.

"No, *sir,*" said Davis. "*Light airs and baffling winds. Squalls and calms. D. R.: five miles. No obs. Pumps attended.* And fill in the barometer and thermometer off of last year's trip. 'Never saw such a voyage,' says you to the consul. 'Thought I was going to run short—'" He stopped in mid-career. "Say," he began again, and once more stopped. "Beg your pardon, Herrick," he added, with undisguised humility, "but did you keep the run of the stores?"

"Had I been told to do so, it should have been done, as the rest was done, to the best of my little ability," said Herrick. "As it was, the cook helped himself to what he pleased."

Davis looked at the table.

"I drew it rather fine, you see," he said at last. "The great thing was to clear right out of Papeete before the consul could think better of it. Tell you what,— I guess I'll take stock."

And he rose from the table, and disappeared with a lamp in the lazaretto.

"'Ere's another screw loose," observed Huish.

"My man," said Herrick, with a sudden gleam of animosity, "it is still your watch on deck, and surely your wheel also?"

"You come the 'eavy swell, don't you, ducky?" said Huish. "Stand away from that binnacle. 'Surely your w'eel, my man.' Yah!"

He lit a cigar ostentatiously, and strolled into the waist with his hands in his pockets.

In a surprisingly short time the captain reappeared; he did not look at Herrick, but called Huish back and sat down.

"Well," he began, "I've taken stock — roughly." He paused, as if for somebody to help him out; and, none doing so, both gazing on him instead with manifest anxiety, he yet more heavily resumed: "Well, it won't fight. We can't do it; that's the bed-rock. I'm as sorry as what you can be, and sorrier. But the game's up. We can't look near Samoa. I don't know as we could get to Peru."

"Wot-ju mean?" asked Huish, brutally.

"I can't most tell myself," replied the captain. "I drew it fine; I said I did; but what's been going on here gets me! Appears as if the devil had been around. That cook must be the holiest kind of a fraud. Only twelve days, too! Seems like craziness. I'll own up square to one thing: I seem to have figured too fine upon the flour. But the rest — my land! I'll never understand it! There's been more waste on this two-penny ship than what there is to an Atlantic Liner." He stole a glance at his companions; nothing good was to be gleaned from their dark faces; and he had recourse to rage. "You wait until I interview that cook!" he roared, and smote the table with his fist. "I'll interview the son of a gun as he's never been spoken to before. I'll put a bead upon the ——!"

"You will not lay a finger on the man," said Herrick. "The fault is yours, and you know it. If you turn a savage loose in your store-room, you know what to expect. I will not allow the man to be molested."

It is hard to say how Davis might have taken this defiance, but he was diverted to a fresh assailant.

"Well!" drawled Huish, "you're a plummy captain, ain't you? You're a blooming captain! Don't you set up any of your chat to me, John Dyvis. I know you now; you ain't any more use than a bloomin' dawl! Oh, you 'don't know,' don't you? Oh, it 'gets you,' do it? Oh, I dessay! W'y, weren't you 'owling for fresh tins every blessed day? 'Ow often 'ave I 'eard you send the 'ole bloomin' dinner off, and tell the man to chuck it in the swill-tub? And breakfast? Oh, my crikey! Breakfast for ten, and you 'ollerin' for more! And now you 'can't most tell'! Blow me if it ain't enough to make a man write an insultin' letter to Gawd! You dror it mild, John Dyvis. Don't 'andle me; I'm dyngerous."

Davis sat like one bemused; it might even have been doubted if he heard. But the voice of the clerk rang about the cabin like that of a cormorant among the ledges of a cliff.

"That will do, Huish," said Herrick.

"Oh, so you tyke his part, do you, you stuck-up, sneerin' snob? Tyke it, then. Come on, the pair of you! But as for John Dyvis, let him look out! He struck me the first night aboard, and I never took a blow yet but wot I gave as good. Let him knuckle down on his marrowbones and beg my pardon; that's my last word!"

"I stand by the captain," said Herrick. "That makes us two to one, both good men; and the crew will all follow me. I hope I shall die very soon; but I have not the least objection to killing you before I go. I should prefer it so. I should do it with no more remorse than winking. Take care, take care, you little cad!"

The animosity with which these words were uttered was so marked in itself, and so remarkable in the man who uttered them, that Huish stared, and even the humiliated Davis reared up his head and gazed at his defender. As for Herrick, the successive agitations and disappointments of the day had left him wholly reckless; he was conscious of a pleasant glow, an agreeable excitement. His head seemed empty; his eyeballs burned as he turned them; his throat was dry as a biscuit. The least dangerous man by nature, except in so far as the weak are always dangerous, at that moment he was ready to slay or be slain, with equal unconcern.

Here, at least, was the gage thrown down, and battle offered. He who should speak next would bring the matter to an issue there and then. All knew it to be so, and hung back; and for many seconds by the cabin clock the trio sat motionless and silent.

Then came an interruption, welcome as the flowers in May.

"Land ho!" sang out a voice on deck. "Land a weatha bow!"

"Land!" cried Davis, springing to his feet. "What's this? There ain't no land here."

And, as men may run from the chamber of a murdered corpse, the three ran forth out of the house, and left their quarrel behind them, undecided.

The sky shaded down at the sea level to the white of opal; the sea itself, insolently, inkily blue, drew all about them the uncompromising wheel of the horizon. Search it as they pleased, not even the practised eye of Captain Davis could descry the smallest interruption. A few filmy clouds were slowly melting overhead; and about the schooner, as around the only point of interest, a tropic bird, white as a snowflake, hung and circled, and displayed, as it turned, the long vermilion feather of its tail. Save the sea and the heaven, that was all.

"Who sang out land?" asked Davis. "If there's any boy playing funny-dog with me, I'll teach him skylarking!"

But Uncle Ned contentedly pointed to a part of the horizon where a greenish, filmy iridescence could be discerned, floating like smoke on the pale heavens.

Davis applied his glass to it, and then looked at the Kanaka. "Call that land?" said he. "Well, it's more than I do!"

"One time, long ago," said Uncle Ned, "I see Anaa all-e-same that, four, five hours befo' we come up. Capena he say sun go down, sun go up again; he say lagoon all-e-same milla."

"All-e-same *what?*" asked Davis.

"Milla, sah," said Uncle Ned.

"Oh, ah! mirror," said Davis. "I see,—reflection from the lagoon. Well, you know, it is just possible, though it's strange I never heard of it. Here, let's look at the chart."

They went back to the cabin, and found the position of the schooner well to windward of the archipelago, in the midst of a white field of paper.

"There, you see for yourselves!" said Davis.

"And yet I don't know," said Herrick; "I somehow think there's something in it. I'll tell you one thing, too, captain: that's all right about the reflection; I heard it in Papeete."

"Fetch up that Findlay, then!" said Davis; "I'll try it all ways. An island wouldn't come amiss the way we're fixed."

The bulky volume was handed up to him, broken-backed, as is the way with Findlay; and he turned to the place, and began to run over the text, muttering to himself, and turning over the pages with a wetted finger.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed; "how's this?" And he read aloud: "*New Island.* According to M. Delille, this island, which from private interests would remain unknown, lies, it is said, in latitude 12° 49′ 10″ south, longitude 133° 6′ west. In addition to the position above given, Commander Matthews, H. M. S. *Scorpion,* states that an island exists in latitude 12 0′ south, longitude 133° 16′ west. This must be the same, if such an island exists, which is very doubtful, and totally disbelieved in by South Sea traders."

"Golly!" said Huish.

"It's rather in the conditional mood," said Herrick.

"It's anything you please," cried Davis, "only there it is! That's our place, and don't you make any mistake."

"'Which from private interests would remain unknown,'" read Herrick, over his shoulder. "What may that mean?"

"It should mean pearls," said Davis. "A pearling island the government don't know about. That sounds like real estate. Or suppose it don't mean anything. Suppose it's just an island; I guess we could fill up with fish and cocoanuts and native stuff, and carry out the Samoa scheme hand over fist. How long did he say it was before they raised Anaa? Five hours, I think."

"Four or five," said Herrick.

Davis stepped to the door. "What breeze had you that time you made Anaa, Uncle Ned?" said he.

"Six or seven knots," was the reply.

"Thirty or thirty-five miles," said Davis. "High time we were shortening sail, then. If it is an island, we don't want to be butting our head against it in the dark; and if it isn't an island, we can get through it just as well by daylight. Ready about!" he roared.

And the schooner's head was laid for that elusive glimmer in the sky, which began already to pale in lustre and diminish in size, as the stain of breath vanishes from a window-pane. At the same time she was reefed close down.

PART II

THE QUARTETTE

CHAPTER VII

THE PEARL FISHER

ABOUT four in the morning, as the captain and Herrick sat together on the rail, there arose from the midst of the night, in front of them, the voice of breakers. Each sprang to his feet and stared and listened. The sound was continuous, like the passing of a train; no rise or fall could be distinguished; minute by minute the ocean heaved with an equal potency against the invisible isle; and as time passed, and Herrick waited in vain for any vicissitude in the volume of that roaring, a sense of the eternal weighed upon his mind. To the expert eye, the isle itself was to be inferred from a certain string of blots along the starry heaven. And the schooner was laid to and anxiously observed till daylight.

There was little or no morning bank. A brightening came in the east; then a wash of some ineffable, faint, nameless hue between crimson and silver; and then coals of fire. These glimmered awhile on the sea-line, and seemed to brighten and darken and spread out; and still the night and the stars reigned undisturbed. It was as though a spark should catch and glow and creep along the foot of some heavy and almost incombustible wall-hanging, and the room itself be scarce menaced. Yet a little after, and the whole east glowed with gold and scarlet, and the hollow of heaven was filled with the daylight.

The isle — the undiscovered, the scarce believed in — now lay before them and close aboard; and Herrick thought that never in his dreams had he beheld anything more strange and delicate. The beach was excellently white, the continuous barrier of trees inimitably green; the land perhaps ten feet high, the trees thirty more. Every here and there, as the schooner coasted northward, the wood was intermitted; and he could see clear over the inconsiderable strip of land (as a man looks over a wall) to the lagoon within; and clear over that, again, to where the far side of the atoll prolonged its pencilling of trees against the morning sky. He tortured himself to find analogies. The isle was like the rim of a great vessel sunken in the waters; it was like the embankment of an annular railway grown upon with wood. So slender it seemed amidst the outrageous breakers, so frail and pretty, he would scarce have wondered to see it sink and disappear without a sound, and the waves close smoothly over its descent.

Meanwhile the captain was in the fore-crosstrees, glass in hand, his eyes in every quarter, spying for an entrance, spying for signs of tenancy. But the isle continued to unfold itself in joints and to run out in indeterminate capes, and still there was neither house nor man nor the smoke of fire. Here a multitude of seabirds soared and twinkled and fished in the blue waters; and there, and for miles together, the fringe of cocoa-palm and pandanus extended desolate, and made desirable green bowers for nobody to visit; and the silence of death was only broken by the throbbing of the sea.

The airs were very light, their speed was small; the heat intense. The decks were scorching underfoot; the sun flamed overhead, brazen out of a brazen sky; the pitch bubbled in the seams, and the brains in the brain-pan. And all the while the excitement of the three adventurers glowed about their bones like a fever. They whispered and nodded and pointed and put mouth to ear with a singular instinct of secrecy, approaching that island underhand, like eavesdroppers and thieves; and even Davis, from the crosstrees, gave his orders mostly by gestures. The hands shared in this mute strain, like dogs, without comprehending it; and through the roar of so many miles of breakers, it was a silent ship that approached an empty island.

At last they drew near to the break in that interminable gangway. A spur of coral sand stood forth on the one hand; on the other, a high and thick tuft of trees cut off the view; between was the mouth of the huge laver. Twice a day the ocean crowded in that narrow entrance and was heaped between these frail walls; twice a day, with the return of the ebb, the mighty surplusage of water must struggle to escape, The hour in which the *Farallone* came there was the hour of flood. The sea turned (as with the instinct of the homing pigeon) for the vast receptacle, swept eddying through the gates, was transmuted, as it did so, into a wonder of watery and silken hues, and brimmed into the inland sea beyond. The schooner worked up, close-hauled, and was caught and carried away by the influx like a toy. She skimmed; she flew; a momentary shadow touched her decks from the shoreside trees; the bottom of the channel showed up for a moment, and was in a moment gone; the next, she floated on the bosom of the lagoon; and below, in the transparent chamber of waters, a myriad of many-coloured fishes were sporting, a myriad pale flowers of coral diversified the floor.

Herrick stood transported. In the gratified lust of his eye he forgot the past and the present; forgot that he was menaced by a prison on the one hand and starvation on the other; forgot that he was come to that island, desperately foraging, clutching at expedients. A drove of fishes, painted like the rainbow and billed like parrots, hovered up in the shadow of the schooner, and passed clear of it, and glinted in the submarine sun. They were beautiful like birds, and their silent passage impressed him like a strain of song.

Meanwhile, to the eye of Davis in the crosstrees, the lagoon continued to expand its empty waters, and the long succession of the shoreside trees to be paid out like fishing-line off a reel. And still there was no mark of habitation. The schooner, immediately on entering, had been kept away to the northward, where the water seemed to be the most deep; and she was now skimming past the tall grove of trees, which stood on that side of the channel and denied further view. Of the whole of the low shores of the island, only this bight remained to be revealed. And suddenly the curtain was raised; they began to open out a haven, snugly elbowed there, and beheld, with an astonishment beyond words, the roofs of men. The appearance, thus "instantaneously disclosed" to those on the deck of the *Farallone,* was not that of a city, rather of a substantial country farm with its attendant hamlet,—a long line of sheds and store-houses; apart, upon the one side, a deep-verandahed dwelling-house; on the other, perhaps a dozen native huts, a building with a belfry and some rude offer at architectural features that might be thought to mark it out for a chapel; on the beach in front, some heavy boats drawn up, and a pile of timber running forth into the burning shallows of the lagoon. From a flag-staff at the pierhead, the red ensign of England was displayed. Behind, about, and over, the same tall grove of palms which had masked the settlement in the beginning, prolonged its roof of tumultuous green fans, and tossed and ruffled overhead, and sang its silver song all day in the wind. The place had the indescribable but unmistakable appearance of being in commission, yet there breathed from it a sense of desertion that was almost poignant; no human figure was to be observed going to and fro about the houses, and there was no sound of human industry or enjoyment. Only, on the top of the beach and hard by the flagstaff, a woman of exorbitant stature and as white as snow was to be seen, beckoning with uplifted arm. The second glance identified her as a piece of naval sculpture, the figure-head of a ship that had long hovered and plunged into so many running billows, and was now brought ashore to be the ensign and presiding genius of that empty town.

The *Farallone* made a soldier's breeze of it; the wind, besides, was stronger inside than without under the lee of the land; and the stolen schooner opened out successive objects with the swiftness of a panorama, so that the adventurers stood speechless. The flag spoke for itself; it was no frayed and weathered trophy that had beaten itself to pieces on the post, flying over desolation; and, to make assurance stronger, there was to be descried, in the deep shade of the verandah, a glitter of crystal and the fluttering of white napery. If the figure-head at the pier end, with its perpetual gesture and its leprous whiteness, reigned alone in that hamlet, as it seemed to do, it could not have reigned long. Men's hands had been busy, men's feet stirring there, within the circuit of the clock. The Farallones were sure of it; their eyes dug in the deep shadow of the palms for some one hiding. If intensity of looking might have prevailed, they would have pierced the walls of houses; and there came to them, in these pregnant seconds, a sense of being watched and played with, and of a blow impending, that was hardly bearable.

The extreme point of palms they had just passed enclosed a creek, which was thus hidden up to the last moment from the eyes of those on board; and from this a boat put suddenly and briskly out, and a voice hailed.

"Schooner ahoy!" it cried. "Stand in for the pier! In two cables' lengths you'll have twenty fathoms' water and good holding-ground."

The boat was manned with a couple of brown oarsmen in scanty kilts of blue. The speaker, who was steering, wore white clothes, the full dress of the tropics. A wide hat shaded his face; but it could be seen that he was of stalwart size, and his voice sounded like a gentleman's. So much could be made out. It was plain, besides, that the *Farallone* had been descried some time before at sea, and the inhabitants were prepared for its reception.

Mechanically the orders were obeyed, and the ship berthed; and the three adventurers gathered aft beside the house and waited, with galloping pulses and a perfect vacancy of mind, the coming of the stranger who might mean so much to them. They had no plan, no story prepared, there was no time to make one, they were caught red-handed, and must stand their chance. Yet this anxiety was checkered with hope. The island being undeclared, it was not possible the man could hold any office or be in a position to demand their papers. And beyond that, if there was any truth in Findlay, as it now seemed there should be, he was the representative of the "private reasons;" and must see their coming with a profound disappointment; and perhaps (hope whispered) he would be willing and able to purchase their silence.

The boat was by that time forging alongside, and they were able at last to see what manner of man they had to do with. He was a huge fellow, six feet four in height, and of a build proportionately strong, but his sinews seemed to be dissolved in a listlessness that was more than languor. It was only the eye that corrected this impression,—an eye of an unusual mingled brilliancy and softness, sombre as coal, and with lights that outshone the topaz; an eye of unimpaired health and virility; an eye that bid you beware of the man's devastating anger. A complexion naturally dark had been tanned in the island to a hue hardly distinguishable from that of a Tahitian; only his manners and movements, and the living force that dwelt in him, like fire in flint, betrayed the European. He was dressed in white drill, exquisitely made; his scarf and tie were of tender coloured silks; on the thwart beside him there leaned a Winchester rifle.

"Is the doctor on board?" he cried, as he came up. "Doctor Symonds, I mean? You never heard of him? Nor yet of the *Trinity Hall?* Ah!" He did not look surprised; seemed, rather, to affect it in politeness; but his eye rested on each of the three white men in succession with a sudden weight of curiosity that was almost savage. "Ah, *then,*" said he, "there is some small mistake, no doubt, and I must ask you to what I am indebted for this pleasure?"

He was by this time on the deck, but he had the art to be quite unapproachable; the friendliest vulgarian, three parts drunk, would have known better than take liberties; and not one of the adventurers so much as offered to shake hands.

"Well," said Davis, "I suppose you may call it an accident. We had heard of your island, and read that thing in the 'Directory' about the *private reasons,* you see; so when we saw the lagoon reflected in the sky, we put her head for it at once, and here we are."

"'Ope we don't intrude!" said Huish.

The stranger looked at Huish with an air of faint surprise, and looked pointedly away again. It was hard to be more offensive in dumb show.

"It may suit me, your coming here," he said. "My own schooner is overdue, and I may put something in your way in the mean time. Are you open to a charter?"

"Well, I guess so," said Davis; "it depends"

"My name is Attwater," continued the stranger. "You, I presume, are the captain?"

"Yes, sir. I am the captain of this ship. Captain Brown," was the reply.

"Well, see 'ere!" said Huish, "better begin fair! 'E's skipper on deck right enough, but not below. Below we're all equal, all got a lay in the adventure. When it comes to business, I'm as good as 'e; and what I say is, let's go into the 'ouse and have a lush, and talk it over among pals. We've some prime fizz," he said, and winked.

The presence of the gentleman lighted up like a candle the vulgarity of the clerk; and Herrick, instinctively, as one shields himself from pain, made haste to interrupt.

"My name is Hay," said he, "since introductions are going. We shall be very glad if you will step inside."

Attwater leaned to him swiftly. "University man?" said he.

"Yes, Merton," said Herrick, and the next moment blushed scarlet at his indiscretion.

"I am of the other lot," said Attwater; "Trinity Hall, Cambridge. I called my schooner after the old shop. Well! this is a queer place and company for us to meet in, Mr. Hay," he pursued, with easy incivility to the others. "But do you bear out — I beg this gentleman's pardon, I really did not catch his name."

"My name is 'Uish, sir," returned the clerk, and blushed in turn.

"Ah!" said Attwater. And then turning again to Herrick, "Do you bear out Mr. Whish's description of your vintage, or was it only the unaffected poetry of his own nature bubbling up?"

Herrick was embarrassed; the silken brutality of their visitor made him blush. That he should be accepted as an equal, and the others thus pointedly ignored, pleased him in spite of himself, and then ran through his veins in a recoil of anger.

"I don't know," he said. "It's only California; it's good enough, I believe."

Attwater seemed to make up his mind. "Well, then, I'll tell you what: you three gentlemen come ashore this evening, and bring a basket of wine with you; I'll try and find the food," he said. "And by the by, here is a question I should have asked you when I came on board: Have you had small-pox?"

"Personally, no," said Herrick. "But the schooner had it."

"Deaths?" from Attwater.

"Two," said Herrick.

"Well, it is a dreadful sickness," said Attwater.

"'Ad you any deaths," asked Huish, "'ere on the island?"

"Twenty-nine," said Attwater. "Twenty-nine deaths and thirty-one cases, out of thirty-three souls upon the island. That's a strange way to calculate, Mr. Hay, is it not? Souls! I never say it but it startles me."

"Oh, so that's why everything's deserted?" said Huish.

"That is why, Mr. Whish," said Attwater; "that is why the house is empty and the graveyard full."

"Twenty-nine out of thirty-three!" exclaimed Herrick. "'Why, when it came to burying — or did you bother burying?"

"Scarcely," said Attwater; "or there was one day, at least, when we gave up. There were five of the dead that morning, and thirteen of the dying, and no one able to go about except the sexton and myself. We held a council of war, took the — empty bottles — into the lagoon, and — buried them." He looked over his shoulder, back at the bright water. "Well, so you'll come to dinner, then? Shall we say half-past six? *So* good of you!"

His voice, in uttering these conventional phrases, fell at once into the false measure of society; and Herrick unconsciously followed the example.

"I am sure we shall be very glad," he said. "At half-past six? Thank you so very much."

"'For my voice has been tuned to the note of the gun,
That startles the deep when the combat's begun,'"

quoted Attwater, with a smile, which instantly gave way to an air of funereal solemnity. "I shall particularly expect Mr. Whish," he continued. "Mr. Whish, I trust you understand the invitation?"

"I believe you, my boy!" replied the genial Huish.

"That is right, then; and quite understood, is it not?" said Attwater. "Mr. Whish and Captain Brown at six-thirty without fail; and you, Hay, at four sharp."

And he called his boat.

During all this talk, a load of thought or anxiety had weighed upon the captain. There was no part for which nature had so liberally endowed him as that of the genial ship-captain. But to-day he was silent and abstracted. Those who knew him could see that he hearkened close to every syllable, and seemed to ponder and try it in balances. It would have been hard to say what look there was, cold, attentive, and sinister, as of a man maturing plans, which still brooded over the unconscious guest; it was here, it was there, it was nowhere; it was now so little that Herrick chid himself for an idle fancy; and anon it was so gross and palpable that you could say every hair on the man's head talked mischief.

He woke up now, as with a start. "You were talking of a charter," said he.

"Was I?" said Attwater. "Well, let's talk of it no more at present."

"Your own schooner is overdue, I understand?" continued the captain.

"You understand perfectly, Captain Brown," said Attwater; "thirty-three days overdue at noon to-day."

"She comes and goes, eh? Flies between here and ——?" hinted the captain.

"Exactly; every four months; three trips in the year," said Attwater.

"You go in her, ever?" asked Davis.

"No, I stop here," said Attwater; "one has plenty to attend to here."

"Stop here, do you?" cried Davis. "Say, how long?"

"How long, O Lord!" said Attwater, with perfect, stern gravity. "But it does not seem so," he added, with a smile.

"No, I dare say not," said Davis. "No, I suppose not. Not with all your gods about you, and in as snug a berth as this. For it is a pretty snug berth," said he, with a sweeping look.

"The spot, as you are good enough to indicate, is not entirely intolerable," was the reply.

"Shell, I suppose?" said Davis.

"Yes, there was shell," said Attwater.

"This is a considerable big beast of a lagoon, sir," said the captain. "Was there a — was the fishing — would you call the fishing anyways *good?*"

"I don't know that I would call it anyways anything," said Attwater, "if you put it to me direct."

"There were pearls, too?" said Davis.

"Pearls, too," said Attwater.

"Well, I give out!" laughed Davis, and his laughter ran cracked like a false piece. "If you're not going to tell, you're not going to tell, and there's an end to it."

"There can be no reason why I should affect the least degree of secrecy about my island," returned Attwater. "That came wholly to an end with your arrival; and I am sure at any rate that gentlemen like you and Mr. Whish I should have always been charmed to make perfectly at home. The point on which we are now differing — if you can call it a difference — is one of times and seasons. I have some information which you think I might impart, and I think not. Well, we'll see to-night! By-by, Whish!" He stepped into his boat and shoved off. "All understood, then?" said he. "The captain and Mr. Whish at six-thirty, and you, Hay, at four precise. You understand that, Hay? Mind, I take no denial. If you're not there by the time named, there will be no banquet. No song, no supper, Mr. Whish!"

White birds whisked in the air above, a shoal of party-coloured fishes in the scarce denser medium below; between, like Mahomet's coffin, the boat drew away briskly on the surface, and its shadow followed it over the glittering floor of the lagoon. Attwater looked steadily back over his shoulders as he sat; he did not once remove his eyes from the *Farallone* and the group on her quarter-deck beside the house, till his boat ground upon the pier. Thence, with an agile pace, he hurried ashore, and they saw his white clothes shining in the checkered dusk of the grove until the house received him.

The captain, with a gesture and a speaking countenance, called the adventurers into the cabin.

"Well," he said to Herrick, when they were seated, "there's one good job at least. He's taken to you in earnest."

"Why should that be a good job?" said Herrick.

"Oh, you'll see how it pans out presently," returned Davis. "You go ashore and stand in with him, that's all! You'll get lots of pointers; you can find out what he has, and what the charter is, and who's the fourth man,—for there's four of them, and we're only three."

"And suppose I do, what next?" cried Herrick. "Answer me that!"

"So I will, Robert Herrick," said the captain. "But first, let's see all clear. I guess you know," he said with an imperious solemnity, "I guess you know the bottom is about out of this *Farallone* speculation? I guess you know it's *right* out; and if this old island hadn't turned up right when it did, I guess you know where you and I and Huish would have been?"

"Yes, I know that," said Herrick. "No matter who's to blame, I know it. And what next?"

"No matter who's to blame, you know it, right enough," said the captain, "and I'm obliged to you for the reminder. Now here's this Attwater; what do you think of him?"

"I do not know," said Herrick. "I am attracted and repelled. He was insufferably rude to you."

"And you, Huish?" said the captain.

Huish sat cleaning a favourite brier-root; he scarce looked up from that engrossing task. "Don't ast me what I think of him!" he said. "There's a day comin', I pray Gawd, when I can tell it him myself."

"Huish means the same as what I do," said Davis. "When that man came stepping around, and saying: 'Look here, I'm Attwater'—and you knew it was so, by God!—I sized him right straight up. Here's the real article, I said, and I don't like it; here's the real, first-rate, copper-bottomed aristocrat. *'Aw! don't know ye, do I? God d—n ye, did God make ye?'* No, that couldn't be nothing but genuine; a man's got to be born to that. And notice! smart as champagne and hard as nails; no kind of a fool; no, *sir!* not a pound of him! Well, what's he here upon this beastly island for? I said. *He's* not here collecting eggs. He's a palace at home, and powdered flunkies; and if he don't stay there, you bet he knows the reason why! Follow?"

"Oh, yes, I 'ear you," said Huish.

"He's been doing good business here, then," continued the captain. "For years he's been doing a great business. It's pearl and shell, of course; there couldn't be nothing else in such a place; and no doubt the shell goes off regularly by this *Trinity Hall,* and the money for it straight into the bank, so that's no use to us. But what else is there? Is there nothing else he would be likely to keep here? Is there nothing else he would be bound to keep here? Yes, sir; the pearls! First, because they're too valuable to trust out of his hands. Second, because pearls want a lot of handling and matching; and the man who sells his pearls as they come in, one here, one there, instead of hanging back and holding up — well, that man's a fool, and it's not Attwater."

"It's likely," said Huish, "that's w'at it is; not proved, but likely."

"It's proved," said Davis, bluntly.

"Suppose it was?" said Herrick. "Suppose that was all so, and he had these pearls, — years' and years' collection of them? Suppose he had? There's my question."

The captain drummed with his thick hands on the board in front of him; he looked steadily in Herrick's face, and Herrick as steadily looked upon the table and the pattering fingers. There was a gentle oscillation of the anchored ship, and a big patch of sunlight travelled to and fro between one and the other.

"Hear me!" Herrick burst out suddenly.

"No, you better hear me first," said Davis. "Hear me and understand me. *We*'ve got no use for that fellow, whatever you may have. He's your kind, he's not ours; he's took to you, and he's wiped his boots on me and Huish. Save him if you can!"

"Save him?" repeated Herrick.

"Save him if you're able!" reiterated Davis, with a blow of his clinched fist. "Go ashore, and talk him smooth; and if you get him and his pearls aboard, I'll spare him. If you don't, there's going to be a funeral. Is that so, Huish? Does that suit you?"

"I ain't a forgiving man," said Huish, "but I'm not the sort to spoil business neither. Bring the bloke on board, and his pearls along with him, and you can have it your own way; maroon him where you like — I'm agreeable."

"Well, and if I can't?" cried Herrick, while the sweat streamed upon his face. "You talk to me as if I was God Almighty, to do this and that! But if I can't?"

"My son," said the captain, "you better do your level best, or you'll see sights!"

"Oh, yes," said Huish. "Oh, crikey, yes!" He looked across at Herrick with a toothless smile that was shocking in its savagery; and, his ear caught apparently by the trivial expression he had used, he broke into a piece of the chorus of a comic song which he must have heard twenty years before in London, — meaningless gibberish that, in that hour and place, seemed hateful as a blasphemy: "Hikey, pikey, crikey, fikey, chillingawallaba dory."

The captain suffered him to finish; his face was unchanged.

"The way things are, there's many a man that wouldn't let you go ashore," he resumed. "But I'm not that kind. I know you'd never go back on me, Herrick! Or if you choose to — go and do it, and be d—d!" he cried, and rose abruptly from the table.

He walked out of the house, and, as he reached the door, turned and called Huish, suddenly and violently, like the barking of a dog. Huish followed, and Herrick remained alone in the cabin.

"Now, see here," whispered Davis; "I know that man. If you open your mouth to him again, you'll ruin all."

CHAPTER VIII

BETTER ACQUAINTANCE

THE boat was gone again, and already half way to the *Farallone,* before Herrick turned and went unwillingly up the pier. From the crown of the beach, the figure-head confronted him with what seemed irony, her helmeted head tossed back, her formidable arm apparently hurling something, whether shell or missile, in the direction of the anchored schooner. She seemed a defiant deity from the island, coming forth to its threshold with a rush as of one about to fly, and perpetuated in that dashing attitude. Herrick looked up at her, where she towered above him head and shoulders, with singular feelings of curiosity and romance, and suffered his mind to travel to and fro in her life history. So long she had been the blind conductress of a ship among the waves; so long she had stood here idle in the violent sun that yet did not avail to blister her; and was even this the end of so many adventures, he wondered, or was more behind? And he could have found it in his heart to regret that she was not a goddess, nor yet he a pagan, that he might have bowed down before her in that hour of difficulty.

Where he now went forward, it was cool with the shadow of many well-grown palms; draughts of the dying breeze swung them together overhead; and on all sides, with a swiftness beyond dragon-flies or swallows, the spots of sunshine flitted and hovered and returned. Underfoot, the sand was fairly solid and quite level, and Herrick's steps fell there noiseless as in new-fallen snow. It bore the marks of having been once weeded like a garden alley at home; but the pestilence had done its work, and the weeds were returning. The buildings of the settlement showed here and there through the stems of the colonnade, fresh-painted, trim and dandy, and all silent as the grave. Only here and there in the crypt there was a rustle and scurry and some crowing of poultry; and from behind the house with the verandahs he saw smoke rise and heard the crackling of a fire.

The store-houses were nearest him upon his right. The first was locked; in the second he could dimly perceive, through a window, a certain accumulation of pearl shell piled in the far end; the third, which stood gaping open on the afternoon, seized on the mind of Herrick with its multiplicity and disorder of romantic things. Therein were cables, windlasses, and blocks of every size and capacity; cabin windows and ladders; rusty tanks; a companion hatch; a binnacle with its brass mountings, and its compass idly pointing, in the confusion and dusk of that shed, to a forgotten pole; ropes, anchors, harpoons; a blubber-dipper of copper, green with years; a steering-wheel; a tool-chest with the vessel's name upon the top, the *Asia*,—a whole curiosity-shop of sea curios, gross and solid, heavy to lift, ill to break, bound with brass and shod with iron. Two wrecks at least must have contributed to this random heap of lumber; and as Herrick looked upon it, it seemed to him as if the two ships' companies were there on guard, and he heard the tread of feet and whisperings, and saw with the tail of his eye the commonplace ghosts of sailormen.

This was not merely the work of an aroused imagination, but had something sensible to go upon. Sounds of a stealthy approach were no doubt audible; and while he still stood staring at the lumber, the voice of his host sounded suddenly, and with even more than the customary softness of enunciation, from behind.

"Junk," it said "only old junk! And does Mr. Hay find a parable?"

"I find at least a strong impression," replied Herrick, turning quickly, lest he might be able to catch, on the face of the speaker, some commentary on the words.

Attwater stood in the doorway, which he almost wholly filled, his hands stretched above his head and grasping the architrave. He smiled when their eyes met, but the expression was inscrutable.

"Yes, a powerful impression. You are like me—nothing so affecting as ships!" said he. "The ruins of an empire would leave me frigid, when a bit of an old rail that an old shellback leaned on in the middle watch would bring me up all standing. But come, let's see some more of the island. It's all sand and coral and palm-trees; but there's a kind of quaintness in the place."

"I find it heavenly," said Herrick, breathing deep, with head bared in the shadow.

"Ah, that's because you're new from sea," said Attwater. "I dare say, too, you can appreciate what one calls it. It's a lovely name. It has a flavour, it has a colour, it has a ring and fall to it; it's like its author — it's half Christian! Remember your first view of the island, and how it's only woods and water; and suppose you had asked somebody for the name, and he had answered, *nemorosa Zacynthos.*''

''*Jam medio apparet fluctu!*'' exclaimed Herrick. "Ye gods! yes, how good!"

"If it gets upon the chart, the skippers will make nice work of it," said Attwater. "But here, come and see the diving-shed."

He opened a door, and Herrick saw a large display of apparatus neatly ordered,—pumps and pipes, and the leaded boots, and the huge snouted helmets shining in rows along the wall,—ten complete outfits.

"The whole eastern half of my lagoon is shallow, you must understand," said Attwater; "so we were able to get in the dress to great advantage. It paid beyond belief, and was a queer sight when they were at it; and these marine monsters"—tapping the nearest of the helmets—"kept appearing and reappearing in the midst of the lagoon. Fond of parables?" he asked abruptly.

"Oh, yes!" said Herrick.

"Well, I saw these machines come up dripping and go down again, and come up dripping and go down again, and all the while the fellow inside as dry as toast," said Attwater; "and I thought we all wanted a dress to go down into the world in, and come up scathless. What do you think the name was?" he inquired.

"Self-conceit," said Herrick.

"Ah, but I mean seriously," said Attwater.

"Call it self-respect, then," corrected Herrick, with a laugh.

"And why not grace? Why not God's grace, Hay?" asked Attwater. "Why not the grace of your Maker and Redeemer, he who died for you, he who upholds you, he whom you daily crucify afresh? There is nothing here" — striking on his bosom — "nothing there" — smiting the wall — "and nothing there" — stamping — "nothing but God's grace! We walk upon, we breathe it; we live and die by it; it makes the nails and axles of the universe; and a puppy in pyjamas prefers self-conceit!" The huge dark man stood over against Herrick by the line of divers' helmets, and seemed to swell and glow; and the next moment the life had gone from him. "I beg your pardon," said he; "I see you don't believe in God."

"Not in your sense, I am afraid," said Herrick.

"I never argue with young atheists or habitual drunkards," said Attwater, flippantly. "Let us go across the island to the outer beach."

It was but a little way, the greatest width of that island scarce exceeding a furlong, and they walked gently. Herrick was like one in a dream. He had come there with a mind divided,—come prepared to study that ambiguous and sneering mask, drag out the essential man from underneath, and act accordingly; decision being till then postponed. Iron cruelty, an iron insensibility to the suffering of others, the uncompromising pursuit of his own interests, cold culture, manners without humanity,— these he had looked for, these he still thought he saw. But to find the whole machine thus glow with the reverberation of religious zeal, surprised him beyond words; and he laboured in vain, as he walked, to piece together into any kind of whole his odds and ends of knowledge; to adjust again, into any kind of focus with itself, his picture of the man beside him.

"What brought you here to the South Seas?" he asked presently.

"Many things," said Attwater. "Youth, curiosity, romance, the love of the sea, and (it will surprise you to hear) an interest in missions. That has a good deal declined, which will surprise you less. They go the wrong way to work; they are too parsonish, too much of the old wife, and even the old apple-wife. *Clothes, clothes,* are their idea; but clothes are not Christianity, any more than they are the sun in heaven, or could take the place of it! They think a parsonage with roses, and church bells, and nice old women bobbing in the lanes, are part and parcel of religion. But religion is a savage thing, like the universe it illuminates; savage, cold, and bare, but infinitely strong."

"And you found this island by an accident?" said Herrick.

"As you did," said Attwater. "And since then I have had a business and a colony and a mission of my own. I was a man of the world before I was a Christian; I'm a man of the world still, and I made my mission pay. No good ever came of coddling. A man has to stand up in God's sight and work up to his weight avoirdupois; then I'll talk to him, but not before. I gave these beggars what they wanted,—a judge in Israel, the bearer of the sword and scourge. I was making a new people here, and behold! the angel of the Lord smote them, and they were not!"

With the very uttering of the words, which were accompanied by a gesture, they came forth out of the porch of the palm wood by the margin of the sea, and full in front of the sun, which was near setting. Before them the surf broke slowly. All around, with an air of imperfect wooden things inspired with wicked activity, the land-crabs trundled and scuttled into holes. On the right, whither Attwater pointed and abruptly turned, was the cemetery of the island, a field of broken stones from the bigness of a child's hand to that of his head, diversified by many mounds of the same material, and walled by a rude rectangular enclosure of the same. Nothing grew there but a shrub or two with some white flowers; nothing but the number of the mounds, and their disquieting shape, indicated the presence of the dead.

"'The rude forefathers of the hamlet lie!'" quoted Attwater, as he entered by the open gateway into that unhomely close. "Coral to coral, pebbles to pebbles," he said; "this has been the main scene of my activity in the South Pacific. Some were good, and some bad, and the majority (of course and always) null. Here was a fellow, now, that used to frisk like a dog; if you had called him, he came like an arrow from a bow; if you had not, and he came unbidden, you should have seen the deprecating eye and the little intricate dancing step. Well, his trouble is over now; he has lain down with kings and councillors; the rest of his acts, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles? That fellow was from Penrhyn; like all the Penrhyn islanders he was ill to manage; heady, jealous, violent,—the man with the nose! He lies here quiet enough. And so they all lie. 'And darkness was the burier of the dead.'"

He stood, in the strong glow of the sunset, with bowed head; his voice sounded now sweet and now bitter, with the varying sense.

"You loved these people?" cried Herrick, strangely touched.

"I?" said Attwater. "Dear, no! Don't think me a philanthropist. I dislike men, and I hate women. If I like the islands at all, it is because you see them here plucked of their lendings, their dead birds and cocked hats, their petticoats and coloured hose. Here was one I liked, though," and he set his foot upon a mound. "He was a fine, savage fellow; he had a dark soul. Yes, I liked this one. I am fanciful," he added, looking hard at Herrick, "and I take fads. I like you."

Herrick turned swiftly, and looked far away to where the clouds were beginning to troop together and amass themselves round the obsequies of day. "No one can like me," he said.

"You are wrong there," said the other, "as a man usually is about himself. You are attractive, very attractive."

"It is not me," said Herrick; "no one can like me. If you knew how I despised myself—and why!" His voice rang out in the quiet graveyard.

"I knew that you despised yourself," said Attwater. "I saw the blood come into your face to-day when you remembered Oxford. And I could have blushed for you myself, to see a man, a gentleman, with those two vulgar wolves."

Herrick faced him with a thrill. "Wolves?" he repeated.

"I said wolves, and vulgar wolves," said Attwater. "Do you know that to-day, when I came on board, I trembled?"

"You concealed it well," stammered Herrick.

"A habit of mine," said Attwater. "But I was afraid, for all that. I was afraid of the two wolves." He raised his hand slowly. "And now, Hay, you poor, lost puppy, what do you do with the two wolves?"

"What do I do? I don't do anything," said Herrick. "There is nothing wrong; all is above board; Captain Brown is a good soul; he is a — he is—" The phantom voice of Davis called in his ear, "There's going to be a funeral;" and the sweat burst forth and streamed on his brow. "He is a family man," he resumed again, swallowing; "he has children at home,— and a wife."

"And a very nice man?" said Attwater. "And so is Mr. Whish, no doubt?"

"I won't go so far as that," said Herrick. "I do not like Huish. And yet — he has his merits, too."

"And, in short, take them for all in all, as good a ship's company as one would ask?" said Attwater.

"Oh, yes," said Herrick, "quite."

"So, then, we approach the other point, of why you despise yourself?" said Attwater.

"Do we not all despise ourselves?" cried Herrick. "Do not you?"

"Oh, I say I do. But do I?" said Attwater. "One thing I know, at least; I never gave a cry like yours.

Hay, it came from a bad conscience! Ah, man, that poor diving-dress of self-conceit is sadly tattered! To-day, if ye will hear my voice. To-day, now, while the sun sets, and here in this burying-place of brown innocents, fall on your knees and cast your sins and sorrows on the Redeemer. Hay ——"

"Not Hay!" interrupted the other, strangling. "Don't call me that! I mean — For God's sake, can't you see I'm on the rack?"

"I see it; I know it; I put and keep you there; my fingers are on the screws," said Attwater. "Please God, I will bring a penitent this night before His throne. Come, come to the mercy seat! He waits to be gracious, man,— waits to be gracious!"

He spread out his arms like a crucifix; his face shone with the brightness of a seraph's; in his voice, as it rose to the last word, the tears seemed ready.

Herrick made a vigorous call upon himself. "Attwater," he said, "you push me beyond bearing. What am I to do? I do not believe. It is living truth to you; to me, upon my conscience, only folk-lore. I do not believe there is any form of words under heaven by which I can lift the burthen from my shoulders. I must stagger on to the end with the pack of my responsibility; I cannot shift it. Do you suppose I would not, if I thought I could? I cannot—cannot—cannot—and let that suffice!"

The rapture was all gone from Attwater's countenance; the dark apostle had disappeared, and in his place there stood an easy, sneering gentleman, who took off his hat and bowed. It was pertly done, and the blood burned in Herrick's face.

"What do you mean by that?" he cried.

"Well, shall we go back to the house?" said Attwater. "Our guests will soon be due."

Herrick stood his ground a moment, with clenched fists and teeth; and as he so stood, the fact of his errand there slowly swung clear in front of him, like the moon out of clouds. He had come to lure that man on board; he was failing, even if it could be said that he had tried; he was sure to fail now, and knew it, and knew it was better so. And what was to be next?

With a groan he turned to follow his host, who was standing with a polite smile, and instantly, and somewhat obsequiously, led the way into the now darkened colonnade of palms. There they went in silence; the earth gave up richly of her perfume, the air tasted warm and aromatic in the nostrils, and, from a great way forward in the wood, the brightness of lights and fire marked out the house of Attwater.

Herrick meanwhile revolved and resisted an immense temptation, to go up, to touch him on the arm, and breathe a word in his ear: "Beware, they are going to murder you." There would be one life saved; but what of the two others? The three lives went up and down before him like buckets in a well, or like the scales of balances. It had come to a choice, and one that must be speedy. For certain invaluable minutes the wheels of life ran before him, and he could still divert them with a touch to the one side or the other; still choose who was to live and who was to die. He considered the men. Attwater intrigued, puzzled, dazzled, enchanted, and revolted him. Alive, he seemed but a doubtful good; and the thought of him lying dead was so unwelcome that it pursued him, like a vision, with every circumstance of colour and sound. Incessantly he had before him the image of that great mass of man, stricken down, in varying attitudes and with varying wounds,—fallen prone, fallen supine, fallen on his side, or clinging to a doorpost, with the changing face and the relaxing fingers of the death agony. He heard the click of the trigger, the thud of the ball, the cry of the victim; he saw the blood flow. And this building-up of circumstance was like a consecration of the man, till he seemed to walk in sacrificial fillets. Next he considered Davis, with his thick-fingered, coarse-grained, oat-bread commonness of nature; his indomitable valour and mirth in the old days of their starvation; the endearing blend of his faults and virtues; the sudden shining forth of a tenderness that lay too deep for tears; his children,—Ada and her bowel complaint, and Ada's doll. No, death could not be suffered to approach that head, even in fancy. With a general heat and a bracing of his muscles, it was borne in on Herrick that Ada's father would find in him a son to the death. And even Huish shared a little in that sacredness; by the tacit adoption of daily life they were become brothers; there was an implied bond of loyalty in their cohabitation of the ship and of their past miseries, to which Herrick must be a little true or wholly dishonoured. Horror of sudden death for horror of sudden death, there was here no hesitation possible; it must be Attwater. And no sooner was the thought formed (which was a sentence) than the whole mind of the man ran in a panic to the other side; and when he looked within himself, he was aware only of turbulence and inarticulate outcry.

In all this there was no thought of Robert Herrick. He had complied with the ebb-tide in man's affairs, and the tide had carried him away; he heard already the roaring of the maelstrom that must hurry him under. And in his bedevilled and dishonoured soul there was no thought of self.

For how long he walked silent by his companion, Herrick had no guess. The clouds rolled suddenly away; the orgasm was over; he found himself placid with the placidity of despair; there returned to him the power of commonplace speech: and he heard with surprise his own voice say: "What a lovely evening!"

"Is it not?" said Attwater. "Yes, the evenings here would be very pleasant if one had anything to do. By day, of course, one can shoot."

"You shoot?" asked Herrick.

"Yes, I am what you would call a fine shot," said Attwater. "It is faith; I believe my balls will go true; if I were to miss once, it would spoil me for nine months."

"You never miss, then?" said Herrick.

"Not unless I mean to," said Attwater. "But to miss nicely is the art. There was an old king one knew in the Western Islands, who used to empty a Winchester all round a man, and stir his hair or nick a rag out of his clothes with every ball except the last; and that went plump between the eyes. It was pretty practice."

"You could do that?" asked Herrick, with a sudden chill.

"Oh, I can do anything," returned the other. "You do not understand; what must be, must."

They were now come near to the back part of the house. One of the men was engaged about the cooking-fire, which burned with the clear, fierce, essential radiance of cocoanut shells. A fragrance of strange meats was in the air. All round in the verandahs lamps were lighted, so that the place shone abroad in the dusk of the trees with many complicated patterns of shadow.

"Come and wash your hands," said Attwater, and led the way into a clean, matted room with a cot-bed, a safe, a shelf or two of books in a glazed case, and an iron washing-stand. Presently he cried in the native tongue, and there appeared for a moment in the doorway a plump and pretty young woman with a clean towel.

"Hullo!" cried Herrick, who now saw for the first time the fourth survivor of the pestilence, and was startled by the recollection of the captain's orders.

"Yes," said Attwater, "the whole colony lives about the house,— what's left of it. We are all afraid of devils, if you please, and Taniera and she sleep in the front parlour, and the other boy on the verandah."

"She is pretty," said Herrick.

"Too pretty," said Attwater. "That was why I had her married. A man never knows when he may be inclined to be a fool about women: so when we were left alone, I had the pair of them to the chapel and performed the ceremony. She made a lot of fuss. I do not take at all the romantic views of marriage," he explained.

"And that strikes you as a safeguard?" asked Herrick, with amazement.

"Certainly. I am a plain man, and very literal.

Whom God hath joined together, are the words, I fancy. So one married them, and respects the marriage," said Attwater.

"Ah!" said Herrick.

"You see, I may look to make an excellent marriage when I go home," began Attwater, confidentially. "I am rich. This safe alone"— laying his hand upon it— "will be a moderate fortune when I have the time to place the pearls upon the market. Here are ten years' accumulation from a lagoon where I have had as many as ten divers going all day long; and I went farther than people usually do in these waters, for I rotted a lot of shell, and did splendidly. Would you like to see them?"

This confirmation of the captain's guess hit Herrick hard, and he contained himself with difficulty. "No, thank you, I think not," said he. "I do not care for pearls. I am very indifferent to all these——"

"Gewgaws?" suggested Attwater. "And yet I believe you ought to cast an eye on my collection, which is really unique, and which— Oh! it is the case with all of us and everything about us!— hangs by a hair. To-day it groweth up and flourisheth; to-morrow it is cut down and cast into the oven. To-day it is here and together in this safe; to-morrow, to-night, it may be scattered. Thou fool! this night thy soul shall be required of thee."

"I do not understand you," said Herrick.

"Not?" said Attwater.

"You seem to speak in riddles," said Herrick, unsteadily. "I do not understand what manner of man you are, nor what you are driving at."

Attwater stood with his hands upon his hips, and his head bent forward. "I am a fatalist," he replied, "and just now (if you insist on it) an experimentalist. Talking of which, by the by, who painted out the schooner's name?" he said, with mocking softness. "Because, do you know? one thinks it should be done again. It can still be partly read; and whatever is worth doing, is surely worth doing well. You think with me? That is so nice. Well, shall we step on the verandah? I have a dry sherry that I would like your opinion of."

Herrick followed him forth to where, under the light of the hanging lamps, the table shone with napery and crystal; followed him as the criminal goes with the hangman, or the sheep with the butcher; took the sherry mechanically, drank it, and spoke mechanical words of praise. The object of his terror had become suddenly inverted; till then he had seen Attwater trussed and gagged, a helpless victim, and had longed to run in and save him; he saw him now tower up mysterious and menacing, the angel of the Lord's wrath, armed with knowledge, and threatening judgment. He set down his glass again, and was surprised to see it empty.

"You go always armed?" he said, and the next moment could have plucked his tongue out.

"Always," said Attwater. "I have been through a mutiny here; that was one of my incidents of missionary life."

And just then the sound of voices reached them, and looking forth from the verandah, they saw Huish and the captain drawing near.

CHAPTER IX

THE DINNER-PARTY

THEY sat down to an island dinner remarkable for its variety and excellence; turtle soup and steak, fish, fowls, a sucking-pig, a cocoanut salad, and sprouting cocoanut roasted for dessert. Not a tin had been opened; and save for the oil and vinegar in the salad, and some green spears of onion which Attwater cultivated and plucked with his own hand, not even the condiments were European. Sherry, hock, and claret succeeded each other, and the *Farallone* champagne brought up the rear with the dessert.

It was plain that, like so many of the extremely religious in the days before teetotalism, Attwater had a dash of the epicure. For such characters it is softening to eat well; doubly so to have designed and had prepared an excellent meal for others; and the manners of their host were agreeably mollified in consequence. A cat of huge growth sat on his shoulder purring, and occasionally, with a deft paw, captured a morsel in the air. To a cat he might be likened himself, as he lolled at the head of his table, dealing out attentions and innuendoes, and using the velvet and the claw indifferently. And both Huish and the captain fell progressively under the charm of his hospitable freedom.

Over the third guest, the incidents of the dinner may be said to have passed for long unheeded. Herrick accepted all that was offered him, ate and drank without tasting, and heard without comprehension. His mind was singly occupied in contemplating the horror of the circumstance in which he sat. What Attwater knew, what the captain designed, from which side treachery was to be first expected, these were the ground of his thoughts. There were times when he longed to throw down the table and flee into the night. And even that was debarred him. To do anything, to say anything, to move at all, were only to precipitate the barbarous tragedy; and he sat spellbound, eating with white lips. Two of his companions observed him narrowly; Attwater with raking, side-long glances that did not interrupt his talk, the captain with a heavy and anxious consideration.

"Well, I must say this sherry is a really prime article," said Huish. "'Ow much does it stand you in, if it's a fair question?"

"A hundred and twelve shillings in London, and the freight to Valparaiso and on again," said Attwater. "It strikes one as really not a bad fluid."

"A 'undred and twelve!" murmured the clerk, relishing the wine and the figures in a common ecstasy. "Oh my!"

"So glad you like it," said Attwater. "Help yourself, Mr. Whish, and keep the bottle by you."

"My friend's name is Huish and not Whish, sir," said the captain, with a flush.

"I beg your pardon, I am sure. Huish and not Whish—certainly," said Attwater. "I was about to say that

I have still eight dozen," he added, fixing the captain with his eye.

"Eight dozen what?" said Davis.

"Sherry," was the reply. "Eight dozen excellent sherry. Why, it seems almost worth it in itself, to a man fond of wine."

The ambiguous words struck home to guilty consciences, and Huish and the captain sat up in their places and regarded him with a scare.

"Worth what?" said Davis.

"A hundred and twelve shillings," replied Attwater.

The captain breathed hard for a moment. He reached out far and wide to find any coherency in these remarks; then, with a great effort, changed the subject.

"I allow we are about the first white men upon this island, sir," said he.

Attwater followed him at once, and with entire gravity, to the new ground. "Myself and Dr. Symonds excepted, I should say the only ones," he returned. "And yet who can tell? In the course of the ages some one may have lived here, and we sometimes think that some one must. The cocoa palms grow all round the island, which is scarce like Nature's planting. We found, besides, when we landed, an unmistakable cairn upon the beach; use unknown, but probably erected in the hope of gratifying some mumbo-jumbo whose very name is forgotten, by some thick-witted gentry whose very bones are lost. Then the island (witness the 'Directory') has been twice reported; and since my tenancy we have had two wrecks, both derelict. The rest is conjecture."

"Dr. Symonds is your partner, I guess?" said Davis.

"A dear fellow, Symonds! How he would regret it, if he knew you had been here," said Attwater.

"'E 's on the *Trinity 'All,* ain't he?" asked Huish.

"And if you could tell me where the *Trinity 'All* was, you would confer a favour, Mr. Whish!" was the reply.

"I suppose she has a native crew?" said Davis.

"Since the secret has been kept ten years, one would suppose she had," replied Attwater.

"Well, now, see 'ere!" said Huish. "You have everything about you in no end style, and no mistake, but I tell you it would n't do for me. Too much of 'the old rustic bridge by the mill;' too retired by 'alf. Give me the sound of Bow Bells!"

"You must not think it was always so," replied Attwater. "This was once a busy shore, although now, hark! you can hear the solitude. I find it stimulating. And talking of the sound of bells, kindly follow a little experiment of mine in silence." There was a silver bell at his right hand to call the servants; he made them a sign to stand still, struck the bell with force, and leaned eagerly forward. The note rose clear and strong; it rang out clear and far into the night and over the deserted island; it died into the distance until there only lingered in the porches of the ear a vibration that was sound no longer. "Empty houses, empty sea, solitary beaches!" said Attwater. "And yet God hears the bell! And yet we sit in this verandah, on a lighted stage, with all heaven for spectators! And you call that solitude?"

There followed a bar of silence, during which the captain sat mesmerised.

Then Attwater laughed softly. "These are the diversions of a lonely man," he resumed, "and possibly not in good taste. One tells one's self these little fairy tales for company. If there *should* happen to be anything in folk-lore, Mr. Hay? But here comes the claret. One does not offer you Laffitte, captain, because I believe it is all sold to the railroad dining-cars in your great country: but this Brâne-mouton is of a good year, and Mr. Whish will give me news of it."

"That's a queer idea of yours!" cried the captain, bursting with a sigh from the spell that had bound him. "So you mean to tell me, now, that you sit here evenings and ring up G — well, ring on the angels — by yourself?"

"As a matter of historic fact, and since you put it directly, one does not," said Attwater. "Why ring a bell, when there flows out from one's self and everything about one a far more momentous silence? The least beat of my heart, and the least thought in my mind, echoing into eternity forever and forever and forever."

"Oh, look 'ere," said Huish, "turn down the lights at once, and the Band of 'Ope will oblige! This ain't a spiritual séance."

"No folk-lore about Mr. Whish — I beg your pardon, captain; Huish, not Whish, of course," said Attwater.

As the boy was filling Huish's glass, the bottle escaped from his hand and was shattered, and the wine spilt on the verandah floor. Instant grimness as of death appeared in the face of Attwater; he smote the bell imperiously, and the two brown natives fell into the attitude of attention, and stood mute and trembling. There was a moment of silence and hard looks; then followed a few savage words in the native; and, upon a gesture of dismissal, the service proceeded as before.

None of the party had as yet observed upon the excellent bearing of the two men. They were dark, undersized, and well set up; stepped softly, waited deftly, brought on the wines and dishes at a look, and their eyes attended studiously on their master.

"Where do you get your labour from, anyway?" asked Davis.

"Ah, where not?" answered Attwater.

"Not much of a soft job, I suppose?" said the captain.

"If you will tell me where getting labour is," said Attwater, with a shrug. "And, of course, in our case, as we could name no destination, we had to go far and wide, and do the best we could. We have gone as far west as the Kingsmills, and as far south as Rapa-iti. Pity Symonds isn't here! He is full of yarns. That was his part, to collect them. Then began mine, which was the educational."

"You mean to run them?" said Davis.

"Ay, to run them," said Attwater.

"Wait a bit," said Davis, "I'm out of my depth. How was this? Do you mean to say you did it single-handed?"

"One did it single-handed," said Attwater, "because there was nobody to help one."

"By God, but you must be a holy terror!" cried the captain, in a glow of admiration.

"One does one's best," said Attwater.

"Well, now!" said Davis, "I have seen a lot of driving in my time, and been counted a good driver myself; I fought my way, third mate, round the Cape Horn with a push of packet-rats that would have turned the Devil out of hell and shut the door on him; and, I tell you, this racket of Mr. Attwater's takes the cake. In a ship, — why there ain't nothing to it! You've got the law with you, that's what does it. But put me down on this blame' beach, alone, with nothing but a whip and a mouthful of bad words, and ask me to — no, *sir!* it's not good enough! I haven't got the sand for that!" cried Davis. "It's the law behind," he added; "it's the law does it, every time!"

"The beak ain't as black as he's sometimes pynted," observed Huish, humorously.

"Well, one got the law after a fashion," said Attwater. "One had to be a number of things. It was sometimes rather a bore."

"I should smile!" said Davis. "Rather lively, I should think."

"I dare say we mean the same thing," said Attwater. "However, one way or another, one got it knocked into their heads that they *must* work, and they *did* — until the Lord took them."

"'Ope you made 'em jump," said Huish.

"When it was necessary, Mr. Whish, I made them jump," said Attwater.

"You bet you did!" cried the captain. He was a good deal flushed, but not so much with wine as admiration; and his eyes drank in the huge proportions of the other with delight. "You bet you did, and you bet that I can see you doing it. By God, you're a man; and you can say I said so!"

"Too good of you, I'm sure," said Attwater.

"Did you — did you ever have crime here?" asked Herrick, breaking his silence with a plangent voice.

"Yes," said Attwater, "we did."

"And how did you handle that, sir?" cried the eager captain.

"Well, you see, it was a queer case," replied Attwater. "It was a case that would have puzzled Solomon. Shall I tell it you? Yes?"

The captain rapturously accepted.

"Well," drawled Attwater, "here is what it was. I dare say you know two types of natives, which may be called the obsequious and the sullen? Well, one had them, — the types themselves, — detected in the fact; and one had them together. Obsequiousness ran out of the first, like wine out of a bottle; sullenness congested in the second. Obsequiousness was all smiles; he ran to catch your eye; he loved to gabble; and he had about a dozen words of beach English, and an eighth of an inch veneer of Christianity. Sullens was industrious; a big, down-looking bee. When he was spoken to, he answered with a black look and a shrug of one shoulder, but the thing would be done. I don't give him to you for a model of manners; there was nothing showy about Sullens, but he was strong and steady, and ungraciously obedient. Now, Sullens got into trouble; no matter how; the regulations of the place were broken, and he was punished accordingly — without effect. So the next day, and the next, and the day after, till I began to be weary of the business, and Sullens (I am afraid) particularly so. There came a day when he was in fault again, for perhaps the thirtieth time; and he rolled a dull eye upon me, with a spark in it and appeared to be about to speak. Now, the regulations of the place are formal upon one point: we allow no explanations. None are received, none allowed to be offered. So one stopped him instantly, but made a note of the circumstance. The next day he was gone from the settlement. There could be nothing more annoying; if the labour took to running away, the fishery was wrecked. There are sixty miles of this island, you see, all in length, like the Queen's Highway; the idea of pursuit in such a place was a piece of single-minded childishness, which one did not entertain. Two days later I made a discovery. It came in upon me with a flash that Sullens had been unjustly punished from beginning to end, and the real culprit throughout had been Obsequiousness. The native who talks, like the woman who hesitates, is lost. You set him talking and lying, and he talks and lies, and watches your face to see if he has pleased you, till at last out comes the truth! It came out of Obsequiousness in the regular course. I said nothing to him; I dismissed him; and, late as it was, for it was already night, set off to look for Sullens. I had not far to go; about two hundred yards up the island the moon showed him to me. He was hanging in a cocoa palm — I'm not botanist enough to tell you how — but it's the way, in nine cases out of ten, these natives commit suicide. His tongue was out, poor devil, and the birds had got at him. I spare you details; he was an ugly sight! I gave the business six good hours of thinking in this verandah. My justice had been made a fool of. I don't suppose that I was ever angrier. Next day I had the conch sounded and all hands out before sunrise. One took one's gun and led the way with Obsequiousness. He was very talkative; the beggar supposed that all was right, now he had confessed. In the old schoolboy phrase, he was plainly 'sucking up' to me; full of protestations of good will and good behaviour, to which one answered one really can't remember what. Presently the tree came in sight, and the hanged man. They all burst out lamenting for their comrade in the island way, and Obsequiousness was the loudest of the mourners. He was quite genuine; a noxious creature, without any consciousness of guilt. Well, presently—to make a long story short—one told him to go up the tree. He stared a bit, looked at one with a trouble in his eye, and had rather a sickly smile, but went. He was obedient to the last; he had all the pretty virtues, but the truth was not in him. So soon as he was up, he looked down, and there was the rifle covering him; and at that he gave a whimper like a dog. You could hear a pin drop; no more keening now. There they all crouched upon the ground with bulging eyes; there was he in the tree-top, the colour of lead; and between was the dead man, dancing a bit in the air. He was obedient to the last, recited his crime, recommended his soul to God. And then——"

Attwater paused, and Herrick, who had been listening attentively, made a convulsive movement which upset his glass.

"And then?" said the breathless captain.

"Shot," said Attwater. "They came to ground together."

Herrick sprang to his feet with a shriek and an insensate gesture.

"It was a murder," he screamed. "A cold-hearted, bloody-minded murder! You monstrous being! Murderer and hypocrite! Murderer and hypocrite! Murderer and hypocrite!" he repeated, and his tongue stumbled among the words.

The captain was by him in a moment. "Herrick!" he cried, "behave yourself! Here, don't be a blame' fool!"

Herrick struggled in his embrace like a frantic child, and suddenly bowing his face in his hands, choked into a sob, the first of many, which now convulsed his body silently, and now jerked from him indescribable and meaningless sounds.

"Your friend appears over-excited," remarked Attwater, sitting unmoved, but all alert, at table.

"It must be the wine," replied the captain. "He ain't no drinking man, you see. I—I think I'll take him away. A walk'll sober him up, I guess."

He led him without resistance out of the verandah and into the night, in which they soon melted; but still for some time, as they drew away, his comfortable voice was to be heard soothing and remonstrating, and Herrick answering, at intervals, with the mechanical noises of hysteria.

"'E's like a bloomin' poultry yard," observed Huish, helping himself to wine (of which he spilled a good deal) with gentlemanly ease. "A man should learn to beyave at table," he added.

"Rather bad form, is it not?" said Attwater. "Well, well, we are left *tête-à-tête*. A glass of wine with you, Mr. Whish!"

CHAPTER X

THE OPEN DOOR

THE captain and Herrick meanwhile turned their backs upon the lights in Attwater's veranda, and took a direction towards the pier and the beach of the lagoon.

The isle, at this hour, with its smooth floor of sand, the pillared roof overhead, and the prevalent illumination of the lamps, wore an air of unreality, like a deserted theatre or a public garden at midnight. A man looked about him for the statues and tables. Not the least air of wind was stirring among the palms, and the silence was emphasised by the continuous clamour of the surf from the sea-shore, as it might be of traffic in the next street.

Still talking, still soothing him, the captain hurried his patient on, brought him at last to the lagoon side, and, leading him down the beach, laved his head and face with the tepid water. The paroxysm gradually subsided, the sobs became less convulsive, and then ceased. By an odd but not quite unnatural conjunction, the captain's soothing current of talk died away at the same time, and by proportional steps, and the pair remained sunk in silence. The lagoon broke at their feet in petty wavelets, and with a sound as delicate as a whisper; stars of all degrees looked down on their own images in the vast mirror; and the more angry colour of the *Farallone's* riding-lamp burned in the middle distance. For long they continued to gaze on the scene before them, and hearken anxiously to the rustle and tinkle of that miniature surf, or the more distant and loud reverberations from the outer coast. For long, speech was denied them; and when the words came at last, they came to both simultaneously.

"Say, Herrick——" the captain was beginning.

But Herrick, turning swiftly towards his companion, beat him down with the eager cry: "Let's up anchor, captain, and to sea!"

"Where to, my son?" said the captain. "Up anchor's easy saying. But where to?"

"To sea," responded Herrick. "The sea's big enough! To sea, away from this dreadful island and that — oh — that sinister man!"

"Oh, we'll see about that!" said Davis. "You brace up, and we'll see about that. You're all run down, that's what's wrong with you. You're all nerves like Jemimar. You've got to brace up good, and be yourself again, and then we'll talk."

"To sea," reiterated Herrick; "to sea to-night — now — this moment!"

"It can't be, my son," replied the captain firmly. "No ship of mine puts to sea without provisions; you can take that for settled."

"You don't seem to understand," said Herrick. "The whole thing is over, I tell you. There is nothing to do here, when he knows all. That man there with the cat knows all. Can't you take it in?"

"All what?" asked the captain, visibly discomposed.

"Why, he received us like a perfect gentleman, and treated us real handsome until you began with your foolery; and I must say I've seen men shot for less, and nobody sorry! What more do you expect, anyway?"

Herrick rocked to and fro upon the sand, shaking his head.

"Guying us," he said. "He was guying us — only guying us; it's all we're good for."

"There was one queer thing, to be sure," admitted the captain, with a misgiving of the voice; "that about the sherry. D—d if I caught on to that. Say, Herrick, you didn't give me away?"

"Oh! give you away!" repeated Herrick with weary, querulous scorn. "What was there to give away? We're transparent; we've got rascal branded on us; detected rascal — detected rascal! Why, before he came on board, there was the name painted out, and he saw the whole thing. He made sure we would kill him there and then, and stood guying you and Huish on the chance. He calls that being frightened! Next he had me ashore; a fine time I had! *The two wolves,* he calls you and Huish. *What is the puppy doing with the two wolves?* he asked. He showed me his pearls; he said they might be dispersed before morning, and *all hung by a hair* — and smiled as he said it; such a smile! Oh, it's no use, I tell you! He knows all; he sees through all. We only make him laugh with our pretences — he looks at us, and laughs like God!"

There was a silence. Davis stood with contorted brows, gazing into the night.

"The pearls?" he said suddenly. "He showed them to you? He has them?"

"No, he didn't show them. I forgot; only the safe they were in," said Herrick. "But you'll never get them!"

"I've two words to say to that," said the captain.

"Do you think he would have been so easy at table unless he was prepared?" cried Herrick. "The servants were both armed. He was armed himself; he always is, he told me. You will never deceive his vigilance. Davis, I know it! It's all up, I tell you, and keep telling you, and proving it. All up; all up! There's nothing for it, there's nothing to be done. All gone — life, honour, love. O my God! my God! why was I born?"

Another pause followed upon this outburst.

The captain put his hands to his brow.

"Another thing!" he broke out. "Why did he tell you all this? Seems like madness to me."

Herrick shook his head with gloomy iteration. "You wouldn't understand if I were to tell you," said he.

"I guess I can understand any blame' thing that you can tell me," said the captain.

"Well, then, he's a fatalist," said Herrick.

"What's that — a fatalist?" said Davis.

"Oh, it's a fellow that believes a lot of things," said Herrick. "Believes that his bullets go true; believes that all falls out as God chooses, do as you like to prevent it; and all that."

"Why, I guess I believe right so myself," said Davis.

"You do?" said Herrick.

"You bet I do!" said Davis.

Herrick shrugged his shoulders. "Well, you must be a fool," said he, and he leaned his head upon his knees.

The captain stood biting his hands.

"There's one thing sure," he said at last. "I must get Huish out of that. *He's* not fit to hold his end up with a man like you describe."

And he turned to go away. The words had been quite simple; not so the tone, and the other was quick to catch it.

"Davis!" he cried, "no! Don't do it! Spare *me,* and don't do it! Spare yourself, and leave it alone—for God's sake! for your children's sake!"

His voice rose to a passionate shrillness; another moment, and he might be overheard by their not distant victim. But Davis turned on him with a savage oath and gesture; and the miserable young man rolled over on his face on the sand, and lay speechless and helpless.

The captain meanwhile set out rapidly for Attwater's house. As he went, he considered with himself eagerly, his thoughts racing. The man had understood; he had mocked them from the beginning. He would teach him to make a mockery of John Davis! Herrick thought him a god. Give him a second to aim in, and the god was overthrown. He chuckled as he felt the butt of his revolver. It should be done now, as he went in. From behind? It was difficult to get there. From across the table? No; the captain preferred to shoot standing, so as you could be sure to get your hand upon your gun. The best would be to summon Huish, and when Attwater stood up and turned—ah, then would be the moment! Wrapped in this ardent prefiguration of events, the captain posted towards the house with his head down.

"Hands up! Halt!" cried the voice of Attwater.

And the captain, before he knew what he was doing, had obeyed. The surprise was complete and irremediable. Coming on the top crest of his murderous intentions, he had walked straight into an ambuscade, and now stood, with his hands impotently lifted, staring at the verandah.

The party was now broken up. Attwater leaned on a post, and kept Davis covered with a Winchester. One of the servants was hard by, with a second at the port arms, leaning a little forward, round-eyed with eager expectancy. In the open space at the head of the stair, Huish was partly supported by the other native, his face wreathed in meaningless smiles, his mind seemingly sunk in the contemplation of an unlighted cigar.

"Well," said Attwater, "you seem to me to be a very twopenny pirate!"

The captain uttered a sound in his throat for which we have no name; rage choked him.

"I'm going to give you Mr. Whish — or the winesop that remains of him," continued Attwater. "He talks a great deal when he drinks, Captain Davis of the *Sea Ranger*. But I have quite done with him, and return the article with thanks. Now," he cried sharply, "another false movement like that, and your family will have to deplore the loss of an invaluable parent; keep strictly still, Davis."

Attwater said a word in the native, his eye still undeviatingly fixed on the captain, and the servant thrust Huish smartly forward from the brink of the stair. With an extraordinary simultaneous dispersion of his members, that gentleman bounded forth into space, struck the earth, ricochetted, and brought up with his arms about a palm. His mind was quite a stranger to these events. The expression of anguish that deformed his countenance at the moment of the leap was probably mechanical. And he suffered these convulsions in silence; clung to the tree like an infant; and seemed, by his dips, to suppose himself engaged in the pastime of bobbing for apples. A more finely sympathetic mind, or a more observant eye, might have remarked, a little in front of him on the sand, and still quite beyond reach, the unlighted cigar.

"There is your Whitechapel carrion!" said Attwater. "And now you might very well ask me why I do not put a period to you at once, as you deserve. I will tell you why, Davis. It is because I have nothing to do with the *Sea Ranger* and the people you drowned, or the *Farallone* and the champagne that you stole. That is your account with God; He keeps it, and He will settle it when the clock strikes. In my own case, I have nothing to go on but suspicion; and I do not kill on suspicion, not even vermin like you. But understand; if ever I see any of you again, it is another matter, and you shall eat a bullet. And now take yourself off. March! And as you value what you call your life, keep your hands up as you go!"

The captain remained as he was, his hands up, his mouth open, mesmerised with fury.

"March!" said Attwater. "One, two, three!"

And Davis turned and passed slowly away. But even as he went, he was meditating a prompt, offensive return. In the twinkling of an eye he had leaped behind a tree, and was crouching there, pistol in hand, peering from either side of his place of ambush with bared teeth, a serpent already poised to strike. And already he was too late. Attwater and his servants had disappeared, and only the lamps shone on the deserted table and the bright sand about the house, and threw into the night in all directions the strong and tall shadows of the palms.

Davis ground his teeth. Where were they gone, the cowards? To what hole had they retreated beyond reach? It was in vain he should try anything — he, single, and with a second-hand revolver, against three persons armed with Winchesters, and who did not show an ear out of any of the apertures of that lighted and silent house. Some of them might have already ducked below it from the rear, and be drawing a bead upon him at that moment from the low-browed crypt, the receptacle of empty bottles and broken crockery. No, there was nothing to be done but to bring away (if it were still possible) his shattered and demoralised forces.

"Huish," he said, "come along."

"'s loss my ciga'," said Huish, reaching vaguely forward.

The captain let out a rasping oath. "Come right along here!" said he.

"'s all righ'. Sleep here 'th Atty — Attwa. Go boar' t'morr'," replied the festive one.

"If you don't come, and come now, by the living God I'll shoot you!" cried the captain.

It is not to be supposed that the sense of these words in any way penetrated to the mind of Huish; rather that, in a fresh attempt upon the cigar, he over-balanced himself, and came flying erratically forward, a course which brought him within reach of Davis.

"Now you walk straight," said the captain, clutching him, "or I'll know why not."

"'s loss my ciga'," replied Huish.

The captain's contained fury blazed up for a moment. He twisted Huish round, grasped him by the neck of the coat, ran him in front of him to the pier end, and flung him savagely forward on his face.

"Look for your cigar, then, you swine!" said he; and blew his boat-call till the pea in it ceased to rattle.

An immediate activity responded on board the *Farallone;* far away voices, and soon the sound of oars, floated along the surface of the lagoon; and at the same time, from nearer hand, Herrick aroused himself and strolled languidly up. He bent over the insignificant figure of Huish, where it grovelled, apparently insensible, at the base of the figure-head.

"Dead?" he asked.

"No, he's not dead," said Davis.

"And Attwater?" asked Herrick.

"Now you just shut your head!" replied Davis. "You can do that, I fancy; and by God, I'll show you how! I'll stand no more of your drivel."

They waited accordingly in silence till the boat bumped on the farthest piers, then raised Huish, head and heels, carried him down the gangway, and flung him summarily in the bottom. On the way out he was heard murmuring of the loss of his cigar; and after he had been handed up the side like baggage, and cast down in the alleyway to slumber, his last audible expression was: "Splen'l fl' Attwa!" This the expert construed into "Splendid fellow, Attwater!" With so much innocence had this great spirit issued from the adventures of the evening.

The captain went and walked in the waist with brief, irate turns; Herrick leaned his arms on the taffrail; the crew had all turned in. The ship had a gentle, cradling motion; at times a block piped like a bird. On shore, through the colonnade of palm stems, Attwater's house was to be seen shining steadily with many lamps. And there was nothing else visible, whether in the heaven above or in the lagoon below, but the stars and their reflections. It might have been minutes or it might have been hours that Herrick leaned there, looking in the glorified water and drinking peace. "A bath of stars," he was thinking, when a hand was laid at last on his shoulder.

"Herrick," said the captain, "I've been walking off my trouble."

A sharp jar passed through the young man, but he neither answered nor so much as turned his head.

"I guess I spoke a little rough to you on shore," pursued the captain. "The fact is, I was real mad; but now it's over and you and me have to turn to and think."

"I will *not* think," said Herrick.

"Here, old man," said Davis kindly, "this won't fight, you know. You've got to brace up and help me get things straight. You're not going back on a friend? That's not like you, Herrick."

"Oh, yes, it is," said Herrick.

"Come, come!" said the captain, and paused as if quite at a loss. "Look here," he cried, "you have a glass of champagne; *I* won't touch it, so that'll show you if I'm in earnest. But it's just the pick-me-up for you; it'll put an edge on you at once."

"Oh, you leave me alone," said Herrick, and turned away.

The captain caught him by the sleeve, and Herrick shook him off and turned on him, for the moment, like a demoniac.

"Go to hell in your own way!" he cried.

And he turned away again, this time unchecked, and stepped forward to where the boat rocked alongside, and ground occasionally against the schooner. He looked about him; a corner of the house was interposed between the captain and himself; all was well; no eye must see him in that last act. He slid silently in the boat, thence silently into the starry water. Instinctively he swam a little; it would be time enough to stop by and by.

The shock of the immersion brightened his mind immediately; the events of the ignoble day passed before him in a frieze of pictures; and he thanked "whatever gods there be" for that open door of suicide. In such a little while he would be done with it, the random business at an end, the prodigal son come home. A very bright planet shone before him and drew a trenchant wake along the water. He took that for his line and followed it; that was the last earthly thing that he should look upon; that radiant speck, which he had soon magnified into a city of Laputa, along whose terraces there walked men and women of awful and benignant features, who viewed him with distant commiseration. These imaginary spectators consoled him; he told himself their talk, one to another; it was of himself and his sad destiny.

From such flights of fancy he was aroused by the growing coldness of the water. Why should he delay? Here, where he was now, let him drop the curtain, let him seek the ineffable refuge, let him lie down with all races and generations of men in the house of sleep. It was easy to say, easy to do. To stop swimming — there was no mystery in that, if he could do it. Could he? And he could not. He knew it instantly. He was aware instantly of an opposition in his members, unanimous and invincible, clinging to life with a single and fixed resolve, finger by finger, sinew by sinew; something that was at once he and not he; at once within and without him; the shutting of some miniature valve in his brain, which a single manly thought should suffice to open; and the grasp of an external fate ineluctable as gravity. To any man there may come at times a consciousness that there blows through all the articulations of his body the wind of a spirit not wholly his; that his mind rebels; that another girds him and carries him whither he would not. It came now to Herrick, with the authority of a revelation. There was no escape possible. The open door was closed in his recreant face. He must go back into the world and amongst men without illusion. He must stagger on to the end with the pack of his responsibility and his disgrace, until a cold, a blow, a merciful chance ball, or the more merciful hangman, should dismiss him from his infamy. There were men who could commit suicide: there were men who could not; and he was one who could not.

For perhaps a minute there raged in his mind the coil of this discovery; then cheerless certitude followed, and, with an incredible simplicity of submission to ascertained fact, he turned round and struck out for shore. There was a courage in this which he could not appreciate, the ignobility of his cowardice wholly occupying him. A strong current set against him like a wind in his face; he contended with it heavily, wearily, without enthusiasm, but with substantial advantage; marking his progress the while, without pleasure, by the outline of the trees. Once he had a moment of hope. He heard to the southward of him, towards the centre of the lagoon, the wallowing of some great fish, doubtless a shark, and paused for a little, treading water. Might not this be the hangman? he thought. But the wallowing died away; mere silence succeeded; and Herrick pushed out again for the shore, raging as he went at his own nature. Ay, he would wait for the shark; but if he had heard him coming— His smile was tragic. He could have spat upon himself.

About three in the morning, chance and the set of the current, and the bias of his own right-handed body, so decided it between them that he came to shore upon the beach in front of Attwater's. There he sat down, and looked forth into a world without any of the lights of hope. The poor diving-dress of self-conceit was sadly tattered. With the fairy tale of suicide, of a refuge always open to him, he had hitherto beguiled and supported himself in the trials of life; and behold! that also was only a fairy tale; that also was folk-lore. With the consequences of his acts he saw himself implacably confronted for the duration of life, stretched upon a cross, and nailed there with the iron bolts of his own cowardice. He had no tears, he told himself no stories. His disgust with himself was so complete, that even the process of apologetic mythology had ceased. He was like a man cast down from a pillar and every bone broken; he lay there, and admitted the facts, and did not attempt to rise.

Dawn began to break over the far side of the atoll, the sky brightened, the clouds became dyed with gorgeous colours, the shadows of the night lifted. And suddenly Herrick was aware that the lagoon and the trees wore again their daylight livery; and he saw, on board the *Farallone,* Davis extinguishing the lantern, and smoke rising from the galley.

Davis, without doubt, remarked and recognised the figure on the beach — or, perhaps, hesitated to recognise it — for after he had gazed a long while from under his hand, he went into the house and fetched a glass. It was very powerful; Herrick had often used it. With an instinct of shame, he hid his face in his hands.

"And what brings you here, Mr. Herrick-Hay, or Mr. Hay-Herrick?" asked the voice of Attwater. "Your back view from my present position is remarkably fine, and I would continue to present it. We can get on very nicely as we are, and if you were to turn round, do you know, I think it would be awkward."

Herrick slowly rose to his feet; his heart throbbed hard; a hideous excitement shook him, but he was master of himself. Slowly he turned and faced Attwater and the muzzle of a pointed rifle. "Why could I not do that last night?" he thought.

"Well, why don't you fire?" he said aloud, with a voice that trembled.

Attwater slowly put his gun under his arm, then his hands in his pockets.

"What brings you here?" he repeated.

"I don't know," said Herrick; and then, with a cry, "Can you do anything with me?"

"Are you armed?" said Attwater. "I ask for the form's sake."

"Armed? No!" said Herrick. "Oh, yes, I am, too!"

And he flung upon the beach a dripping pistol.

"You are wet," said Attwater.

"Yes, I am wet," said Herrick. "Can you do anything with me?"

Attwater read his face attentively.

"It would depend a good deal upon what you are," said he.

"What? I am a coward!" said Herrick.

"There is very little to be done with that," said Attwater. "And yet the description hardly strikes one as exhaustive."

"Oh! what does it matter?" cried Herrick. "Here I am. I am broken crockery; the whole of my life is gone to water; I have nothing left that I believe in, except my living horror of myself. Why do I come to you? I don't know. You are cold, cruel, hateful; and I hate you, or I think I hate you. But you are an honest man, an honest gentleman. I put myself helpless in your hands. What must I do? If I can't do anything, be merciful, and put a bullet through me; it's only a puppy with a broken leg!"

"If I were you, I would pick up that pistol, come up to the house, and put on some dry clothes," said Attwater.

"If you really mean it?" said Herrick. "You know they — we — they — But you know all."

"I know quite enough," said Attwater. "Come up to the house."

And the captain, from the deck of the *Farallone,* saw the two men pass together under the shadow of the grove.

CHAPTER XI

DAVID AND GOLIATH

Huish had bundled himself up from the glare of the day, his face to the house, his knees retracted; the frail bones in the thin tropical raiment seemed scarce more considerable then a fowl's; and Davis, sitting on the rail, with his arm about a stay, contemplated him with gloom, wondering what manner of counsel that insignificant figure should contain. For since Herrick had thrown him off and deserted to the enemy, Huish, alone of mankind, remained to him to be a helper and oracle.

He considered their position with a sinking heart. The ship was a stolen ship; the stores, whether from initial carelessness or ill administration during the voyage, were insufficient to carry them to any port except back to Papeete; and there retribution waited in the shape of a *gendarme,* a judge with a queer-shaped hat, and the horror of distant Noumea. Upon that side there was no glimmer of hope. Here, at the island, the dragon was roused; Attwater with his men and his Winchesters watched and patrolled the house; let him who dare approach it. What else was then left but to sit there inactive, pacing the decks, until the *Trinity Hall* arrived, and they were cast into irons, or until the food came to an end, and the pangs of famine succeeded? For the *Trinity Hall* Davis was prepared. He would barricade the house, and die there, defending it, like a rat in a crevice. But for the other? The cruise of the *Farallone,* into which he had plunged, only a fortnight before, with such golden expectations, could this be the nightmare end of it, — the ship rotting at anchor, the crew stumbling and dying in the scuppers? It seemed as if any extreme of hazard were to be preferred to so grisly a certainty; as if it would be better to up-anchor, after all, put to sea at a venture, and perhaps perish at the hands of cannibals on one of the more obscure Paumotus. His eye roved swiftly over sea and sky in quest of any promise of wind, but the fountains of the Trade were empty. Where it had run yesterday, and for weeks before, a roaring blue river charioting clouds, silence now reigned, and the whole height of the atmosphere stood balanced. On the endless ribbon of island that stretched out to either hand of him its array of golden and green and silvery palms, not the most volatile frond was to be seen stirring; they drooped to their stable images in the lagoon like things carved of metal, and already their long line began to reverberate heat. There was no escape possible that day, none probable on the morrow. And still the stores were running out.

Then came over Davis, from deep down in the roots of his being, or at least from far back among his memories of childhood and innocence, a wave of superstition. This run of ill-luck was something beyond natural; the chances of the game were in themselves more various; it seemed as if the devil must serve the pieces. The devil? He heard again the clear note of Attwater's bell ringing abroad into the night, and dying away. How, if God —— ?

Briskly he averted his mind. Attwater — that was the point. Attwater had food and a treasure of pearls; escape made possible in the present, riches in the future. They must come to grips with Attwater; the man must die. A smoky heat went over his face as he recalled the impotent figure he had made last night, and the contemptuous speeches he must bear in silence. Rage, shame, and the love of life all pointed the one way; and only invention halted. How to reach him? Had he strength enough? Was there any help in that misbegotten packet of bones against the house?

His eyes dwelled upon him with a strange avidity, as though he would read into his soul; and presently the sleeper moved, stirred uneasily, turned suddenly round, and threw him a blinking look. Davis maintained the same dark stare, and Huish looked away again and sat up.

"Lord, I've an 'eadache on me!" said he. "I believe I was a bit swipey last night. W'ere's that crybyby, 'Errick?"

"Gone," said the captain.

"Ashore?" cried Huish. "Oh, I say, I'd 'a' gone, too."

"Would you?" said the captain.

"Yes, I would," replied Huish. "I like Attwater; 'e's all right; we got on like one o'clock when you were gone. And ain't his sherry in it, rather? It's like Spiers and Pond's Amontillado! I wish I 'ad a drain of it now," he sighed.

"Well, you'll never get no more of it, that's one thing," said Davis, gravely.

"'Ere! wot's wrong with you, Dyvis? Coppers 'ot? Well, look at *me!* *I* ain't grumpy," said Huish. "I'm as plyful as a canyry-bird, I am."

"Yes," said Davis, "you're playful, I own that; and you were playful last night, I believe, and a damned fine performance you made of it."

"'Allo!" said Huish. "'Ow's this? Wot performance?"

"Well, I'll tell you," said the captain, getting slowly off the rail.

And he did, at full length, with every wounding epithet and absurd detail repeated and emphasised; he had his own vanity and Huish's upon the grill and roasted them; and as he spoke he inflicted and endured agonies of humiliation. It was a plain man's master-piece of the sardonic.

"What do you think of it?" said he, when he had done, and looked down at Huish, flushed and serious, and yet jeering.

"I'll tell you wot it is," was the reply, "you and me cut a pretty dicky figure."

"That's so," said Davis; "a pretty measly figure, by God! And, by God! I want to see that man at my knees."

"Ah!" said Huish. "'Ow to get him there?"

"That's it!" cried Davis. "How to get hold to him! They're four to two, though there's only one man among them to count, and that's Attwater. Get a bead on Attwater, and the others would cut and run and sing out like frightened poultry, and old man Herrick would come round with his hat for a share of the pearls. No, *sir!* It's how to get hold of Attwater! And we daren't even go ashore. He would shoot us in the boat like dogs."

"Are you particular about having him dead or alive?" asked Huish.

"I want to see him dead," said the captain.

"Ah, well," said Huish. "Then I believe I'll do a bit of breakfast."

And he turned into the house.

The captain doggedly followed him.

"What's this?" he asked. "What's your idea, anyway?"

"Oh, you let me alone, will you?" said Huish, opening a bottle of champagne. "You'll 'ear my idea soon enough. Wyte till I pour some cham on my 'ot coppers." He drank a glass off, and affected to listen. "'Ark!" said he, "'ear it fizz. Like 'am fryin', I declare. 'Ave a glass, do, and look sociable."

"No," said the captain, with emphasis. "No, I will not. There's business."

"You p'ys your money and you tykes your choice, my little man," returned Huish. "Seems rather a shyme to me to spoil your breakfast for wot's really ancient 'istory."

He finished three parts of a bottle of champagne and nibbled a corner of biscuit with extreme deliberation, the captain sitting opposite and champing the bit like an impatient horse. Then Huish leaned his arms on the table and looked Davis in the face.

"W'en you're ready," said he.

"Well, now, what's your idea?" said Davis, with a sigh.

"Fair play!" said Huish. "What's yours?"

"The trouble is that I've got none," replied Davis; and wandered for some time in aimless discussion of the difficulties in their path, and useless explanations of his own fiasco.

"About done?" said Huish.

"I'll dry up right here," replied Davis.

"Well, then," said Huish, "you give me your 'and across the table, and say: 'Gawd strike me dead if I don't back you up.'"

His voice was hardly raised, yet it thrilled the hearer. His face seemed the epitome of cunning, and the captain recoiled from it as from a blow.

"What for?" said he.

"Luck," said Huish. "Substantial guarantee demanded."

And he continued to hold out his hand.

"I don't see the good of any such tomfoolery," said the other.

"I do, though," returned Huish. "Gimme your 'and and say the words, then you'll 'ear my view of it. Don't, and you don't."

The captain went through the required form, breathing short, and gazing on the clerk with anguish. What to fear he knew not; yet he feared slavishly what was to fall from these pale lips.

"Now, if you'll excuse me 'alf a second," said Huish, "I 'll go and fetch the byby."

"The baby?" said Davis. "What's that?"

"Fragile. With care. This side up," replied the clerk, with a wink, as he disappeared.

He returned, smiling to himself, and carrying in his hand a silk handkerchief. The long, stupid wrinkles ran up Davis's brow as he saw it. What should it contain? He could think of nothing more recondite than a revolver.

Huish resumed his seat.

"Now," said he, "are you man enough to take charge of 'Errick and the niggers? Because I'll take care of Hattwater."

"How?" cried Davis. "You can't!"

"Tut, tut," said the clerk. "You gimme time. Wot's the first point? The first point is, that we can't get ashore; and I'll make you a present of that for a 'ard one. But 'ow about a flag of truce? Would that do the trick, d'ye think, or would Attwater simply blyze aw'y at us in the bloomin' boat like dawgs?"

"No," said Davis, "I don't believe he would."

"No more do I," said Huish. "I don't believe he would, either; and I'm sure I 'ope he won't. So then you can call us ashore. Next point is to get near the managin' direction. And for that I'm going to 'ave you write a letter, in w'ich you s'y you're ashymed to meet his eye, and that the bearer, Mr. J. L. 'Uish, is empowered to represent you; armed with w'ich seemin'ly simple expedient, Mr. J. L. 'Uish will proceed to business."

He paused, like one who had finished, but still held Davis with his eye.

"How?" said Davis. "Why?"

"Well, you see, you're big," returned Huish; "'e knows you 'ave a gun in your pocket, and anybody can see with 'alf an eye that you ain't the man to 'esitate about usin' it. So it's no go with you, and never was; you're out of the runnin', Dyvis. But he won't be afryde of me, I'm such a little un. I'm unarmed — no kid about that — and I'll 'old my 'ands up right enough." He paused. "If I can manage to sneak up nearer to him as we talk," he resumed, "you look out and back me up smart. If I don't, we go aw'y again, and nothink to 'urt. See?"

The captain's face was contorted by the frenzied effort to comprehend.

"No, I don't see," he cried. "I can't see. What do you mean?"

"I mean to do for the Beast!" cried Huish, in a burst of venomous triumph. "I'll bring the 'ulkin' bully to grass. He's 'ad his larks out of me: I'm goin' to 'ave my lark out of 'im; and a good lark, too!"

"What is it?" said the captain, almost in a whisper.

"Sure you want to know?" asked Huish.

Davis rose and took a turn in the house.

"Yes, I want to know," he said at last, with an effort.

"W'en your back's at the wall, you do the best you can, don't you?" began the clerk. "I s'y that, because I 'appen to know there's a prejudice against it; it's considered vulgar, awf'ly vulgar." He unrolled the handkerchief and showed a four-ounce jar. "This 'ere's vitriol, this is," said he.

The captain stared upon him with a whitening face.

"This is the stuff!" he pursued, holding it up. "This'll burn to the bone; you'll see it smoke upon 'im like 'ell fire. One drop upon 'is bloomin' heyesight, and I'll trouble you for Attwater!"

"No, no, by God!" exclaimed the captain.

"Now, see 'ere, ducky," said Huish, "this is my bean-feast, I believe? I'm goin' up to that man single-

'anded, I am. 'E's about seven foot high and I'm five foot one. 'E's a rifle in his 'and, 'e's on the look-out; 'e wasn't born yesterday. This is Dyvid and Goliar, I tell you. If I 'ad ast you to walk up and face the music I could understand. But I don't. I on'y ast you to stand by and spifflicate the niggers. It'll all come in quite natural; you'll see, else. Fust thing you know you'll see him running round and 'owling like a good un ——"

"Don't!" said Davis. "Don't talk of it!"

"Well, you *are* a juggins!" exclaimed Huish. "What did you want? You wanted to kill him, and tried to last night. You wanted to kill the 'ole lot of them, and tried to, and 'ere I show you 'ow; and because there's some medicine in a bottle, you kick up this fuss!"

"I suppose that's so," said Davis. "It don't seem someways reasonable, only there it is."

"It's the happlication of science, I suppose?" sneered Huish.

"I don't know what it is," cried Davis, pacing the floor. "It's there; I draw the line at it. I can't put a finger to no such piggishness; it's too damned hateful!"

"And I suppose it's all your fancy pynted it," said Huish, "w'en you take a pistol and a bit o' lead, and copse a man's brains all over him? No accountin' for tystes."

"I'm not denying it," said Davis; "it's something here, inside of me. It's foolishness; I daresay it's damn foolishness. I don't argue, I just draw the line. Isn't there no other way?"

"Look for yourself," said Huish. "I ain't wedded to this, if you think I am. I ain't ambitious. I don't make a point of playin' the lead. I offer to, that's all; and if you can't show me better, by Gawd, I'm goin' to!"

"Then the risk!" cried Davis.

"If you ast me stryte, I should say it was a case of seven to one and no tykers," said Huish. "But that's my lookout, ducky, and I'm gyme. Look at me, Dyvis; there ain't any shilly-shally about me. I'm gyme, that's what I am; gyme all through."

The captain looked at him. Huish sat there, preening his sinister vanity, glorying in his precedency in evil; and the villainous courage and readiness of the creature shone out of him like a candle from a lantern. Dismay and a kind of respect seized hold on Davis in his own despite. Until that moment he had seen the clerk always hanging back, always listless, uninterested, and openly grumbling at a word of anything to do; and now, by the touch of an enchanter's wand, he beheld him sitting girt and resolved, and his face radiant. He had raised the devil, he thought, and asked who was to control him, and his spirits quailed.

"Look as long as you like," Huish was going on. "You don't see any green in my eye. I ain't afryde of Attwater, I ain't afryde of you, and I ain't afryde of words. You want to kill people, that's wot *you* want; but you want to do it in kid gloves, and it can't be done that w'y. Murder ain't genteel, it ain't easy, it ain't safe, and it tykes a man to do it. 'Ere's the man."

"Huish!" began the captain with energy, and then stopped, and remained staring at him with corrugated brows.

"Well, hout with it," said Huish. "'Ave you anythink else to put up? Is there any other chanst to try?"

The captain held his peace.

"There you are, then," said Huish, with a shrug.

Davis fell again to his pacing.

"Oh, you may do sentry-go till you're blue in the mug; you won't find anythink else," said Huish.

There was a little silence,—the captain, like a man launched on a swing, flying dizzily among extremes of conjecture and refusal.

"But see," he said, suddenly pausing. "Can you? Can the thing be done? It—it can't be easy."

"If I get within twenty foot of 'im it'll be done; so you look out," said Huish, and his tone of certainty was absolute.

"How can you know that?" broke from the captain in a choked cry. "You beast, I believe you've done it before!"

"Oh, that's private affyres," returned Huish. "I ain't a talking man."

A shock of repulsion struck and shook the captain. A scream rose almost to his lips; had he uttered it, he might have cast himself at the same moment on the debile body of Huish, might have picked him up, and flung him down, and wiped the cabin with him in a frenzy of cruelty that seemed half moral; but the moment passed, and the abortive crisis left the man weaker. The stakes were so high,—the pearls on the one hand, starvation and shame on the other. Ten years of pearls! The imagination of Davis translated them into a new, glorified existence for himself and his family. The seat of this new life must be in London,—there were deadly reasons against Portland, Maine,—and the pictures that came to him were of English manners. He saw his boys marching in the procession of a school, with gowns on, an usher marshalling them, and reading, as he walked, in a great book. He was installed in a villa, semi-detached, the name, "Rosemore," on the gateposts. In a chair on the gravel walk he seemed to sit smoking a cigar, a blue ribbon in his buttonhole, victor over himself and circumstances and the malignity of bankers. He saw the parlour with red curtains, and shells on the mantel-piece; and, with the fine inconsistency of visions, mixed a grog at the mahogany table ere he turned in. With that the *Farallone* gave one of the aimless and nameless movements which (even in an anchored ship and even in the most profound calm) remind one of the mobility of fluids; and he was back again under the cover of the house, the fierce daylight besieging it all round and glaring in the chinks, and the clerk, in a rather airy attitude, awaiting his decision.

He began to walk again. He aspired after the realisation of these dreams, like a horse nickering for water; the lust of them burned in his inside; and the only obstacle was Attwater, who had insulted him from the first. He gave Herrick a full share of the pearls; he insisted on it. Huish opposed him, and he trod the opposition down, and praised himself exceedingly. He was not going to use vitriol himself. Was he Huish's keeper? It was a pity he had asked, but after all— He saw the boys again in the school procession, with the gowns he had thought to be so "tony" long since — And at the same time the incomparable shame of the last evening blazed up in his mind.

"Have it your own way," he said hoarsely.

"Oh, I knew you would walk up," said Huish. "Now for the letter. There's paper, pens, and ink. Sit down, and I'll dictyte."

The captain took a seat and the pen, looked awhile helplessly at the paper, then at Huish. The swing had gone the other way; there was a blur upon his eyes. "It's a dreadful business," he said, with a strong twitch of his shoulders.

"It's rather a start, no doubt," said Huish. "Tyke a dip of ink. That's it. *William John Hattwater, Esq., Sir:*" he dictated.

"How do you know his name is William John?" asked Davis.

"Saw it on a packing-case," said Huish. "Got that?"

"No," said Davis. "But there's another thing. What are we to write?"

"Oh, my golly!" cried the exasperated Huish. "Wot kind of man do *you* call yourself? *I'm* goin' to tell you wot to write—that's *my* pitch—if you'll just be so bloomin' condescendin' as to write it down! *William John Hattwater, Esq., Sir:*" he reiterated. And the captain at last beginning half mechanically to move his pen, the dictation proceeded: *"It is with feelin's of shyme and 'artfelt contrition that I approach you after the yumiliatin' events of last night. Our Mr. 'Errick has left the ship, and will have doubtless communicated to you the nature of our 'opes. Needless to s'y, these are no longer possible. Fate 'as declyred against us, and we bow the 'ead. Well awyre as I am of the just suspicions with w'ich I am regarded, I do not venture* *to solicit the fyvour of an interview for myself; but in order to put an end to a situytion w'ich must be equally pyneful to all, I 'ave deputed my friend and partner, Mr. J. L. Huish, to l'y before you my proposals, and w'ich by their moderytion will, I trust, be found to merit your attention. Mr. J. L. Huish is entirely unarmed, I swear to Gawd! and will 'old 'is 'ands over 'is 'ead from the moment he begins to approach you. I am your fythful servant, John Dyvis.''*

Huish read the letter with the innocent joy of amateurs, chuckled gustfully to himself, and reopened it more than once after it was folded, to repeat the pleasure,—Davis meanwhile sitting inert and heavily frowning.

Of a sudden he rose; he seemed all abroad. "No!" he cried. "No! It can't be! It's too much! It's damnation! God would never forgive it!"

"Well, and 'oo wants him to?" returned Huish, shrill with fury. "You were damned years ago for the *Sea Rynger,* and said so yourself. Well, then, be damned for something else, and 'old your tongue."

The captain looked at him mistily. "No," he pleaded, "no, old man, don't do it."

"'Ere now," said Huish, "I'll give you my ultimytum. Go or st'y w'ere you are; I don't mind; I'm goin' to see that man and chuck this vitriol in his eyes. If you st'y I'll go alone; the niggers will likely knock me on the 'ead, and a fat lot you'll be the better! But there's one thing sure: I'll 'ear no more of your moonin', mullygrubbin' rot, and tyke it stryte."

The captain took it with a blink and a gulp. Memory, with phantom voices, repeated in his ears something similar, something he had once said to Herrick, years ago, it seemed.

"Now, gimme over your pistol," said Huish. "I 'ave to see all clear. Six shots, and mind you don't wyste them."

The captain, like a man in a nightmare, laid down his revolver on the table, and Huish wiped the cartridges and oiled the works.

It was close on noon: there was no breath of wind, and the heat was scarce bearable when the two men came on deck, had the boat manned, and passed down, one after another, into the stern-sheets. A white shirt at the end of an oar served as a flag of truce; and the men, by direction, and to give it the better chance to be observed, pulled with extreme slowness. The isle shook before them like a place incandescent; on the face of the lagoon blinding copper suns, no bigger than sixpences, danced and stabbed them in the eyeball. There went up from sand and sea, and even from the boat, a glare of scathing brightness; and as they could only peer abroad from between closed lashes, the excess of light seemed to be changed into a sinister darkness, comparable to that of a thunder-cloud before it bursts.

The captain had come upon this errand for any one of a dozen reasons, the last of which was desire for its success. Superstition rules all men; semi-ignorant and gross natures, like that of Davis, it rules utterly. For murder he had been prepared; but this horror of the medicine in the bottle went beyond him, and he seemed to himself to be parting the last strands that united him to God. The boat carried him on to reprobation, to damnation; and he suffered himself to be carried, passively consenting, silently bidding farewell to his better self and his hopes.

Huish sat by his side in towering spirits that were not wholly genuine. Perhaps as brave a man as ever lived, brave as a weasel, he must still reassure himself with the tones of his own voice; he must play his part to exaggeration, he must out-Herod Herod, insult all that was respectable, and brave all that was formidable, in a kind of desperate wager with himself. So the young soldier may jest as he goes into the battle; so perhaps, of old, the highwaymen blasphemed on the scaffold.

"Golly, but it's 'ot!" said he. "Cruel 'ot, I call it. Nice d'y to get your gruel in! I s'y, you know, it must feel awf'ly peculiar to get bowled over on a d'y like this. I'd rather have it on a cowld and frusty morning, wouldn't you? [Singing.] *'Ere we go round the mulberry bush on a cowld and frosty mornin'.* [Spoken.] Give you my word, I 'aven't thought o' that in ten years; used to sing it at a hinfant school in 'Ackney — 'Ackney Wick it was. [Singing.] *This is the way the tyler does, the tyler does.* [Spoken.] Bloomin' 'umbug. 'Ow are you off now, for the notion of a future styte? Do you cotton to the tea-fight view, or the old red-'ot Boguey business?"

"Oh, dry up," said the captain.

"No, but I want to know," said Huish. "It's within the sp'ere of practical politics for you and me, my boy; we may both be bowled over, one up, t'other down, within the next ten minutes. It would be rather a lark, now, if you only skipped across, came up smilin' t'other side, and a hangel met you with a B. and S. under his wing. 'Ullo, you'd s'y: 'come! I tyke this kind."

The captain groaned. While Huish was thus airing and exercising his bravado, the man at his side was actually engaged in prayer. Prayer, what for? God knows. But out of his inconsistent, illogical, agitated spirit, a stream of supplication was poured forth, inarticulate as himself, earnest as death and judgment.

"Thou Gawd seest me!" continued Huish. "I remember I had that written in my Bible. I remember the Bible, too, all about Abinadab and parties. Well, Gawd!" said he, apostrophising the meridian, "you're goin' to see a rum start presently, I promise you that!"

The captain bounded.

"I'll have no blasphemy!" he cried, "no blasphemy in my boat."

"All right, cap," said Huish. "Anything to oblige. Any other topic you would like to suggest, the rynegyge, the lightnin' rod, Shykespeare, or the musical glasses? 'Ere's conversytion on tap. Put a penny in the slot, and — 'ullo! 'ere they are!" he cried. "Now or never! Is 'e goin' to shoot?"

And the little man straightened himself into an alert and dashing attitude, and looked steadily at the enemy.

But the captain rose half up in the boat, with eyes protruding.

"What's that?" he cried.

"Wot's wot?" said Huish.

"Those blamed things," said the captain.

And indeed it was something strange. Herrick and Attwater, both armed with Winchesters, had appeared out of the grove behind the figure-head; and to either hand of them, the sun glistened upon two metallic objects, locomotory like men, and occupying in the economy of these creatures the places of heads,— only the heads were faceless. To Davis, hit between wind and water, his mythology appeared to have come alive, and Tophet to be vomiting demons. But Huish was not mystified a moment.

"Divers' 'elmets, you ninny! Can't you see?" he said.

"So they are," said Davis, with a gasp. "And why? Oh, I see, it's for armour."

"Wot did I tell you?" said Huish. "Dyvid and Goliar all the w'y and back."

The two natives (for they it was that were equipped in this unusual panoply of war) spread out to right and left, and at last lay down in the shade, on the extreme flank of the position. Even now that the mystery was explained, Davis was hatefully preoccupied, stared at the flame on their crests, and forgot, and then remembered with a smile, the explanation.

Attwater withdrew again into the grove, and Herrick, with his gun under his arm, came down the pier alone. About half way down he halted and hailed the boat.

"What do you want?" he cried.

"I'll tell that to Mr. Attwater," replied Huish, stepping briskly on the ladder. "I don't tell it to you, because you plyed the trucklin' sneak. Here's a letter for him; tyke it, and give it, and be 'anged to you!"

"Davis, is this all right?" said Herrick.

Davis raised his chin, glanced swiftly at Herrick and away again, and held his peace. The glance was charged with some deep emotion, but whether of hatred or fear, it was beyond Herrick to divine.

"Well," he said, "I'll give the letter." He drew a score with his foot on the boards of the gangway. "Till I bring the answer, don't move a step past this."

And he returned to where Attwater leaned against a tree, and gave him the letter. Attwater glanced it through.

"What does that mean?" he asked, passing it to Herrick. "Treachery?"

"Oh, I suppose so," said Herrick.

"Well, tell him to come on," said Attwater. "One isn't a fatalist for nothing. Tell him to come on and to look out."

Herrick returned to the figure-head. Half way down the pier the clerk was waiting, with Davis by his side.

"You are to come along, Huish," said Herrick. "He bids you look out, no tricks."

Huish walked briskly up the pier, and paused face to face with the young man.

"W'ere is 'e?" said he, and to Herrick's surprise, the low-bred, insignificant face before him flushed suddenly crimson and went white again.

"Right forward," said Herrick, pointing. "Now, your hands above your head."

The clerk turned away from him and toward the figure-head, as though he were about to address to it his devotions — he was seen to heave a deep breath — and raised his arms. In common with many men of his unhappy physical endowments, Huish's hands were disproportionately long and broad, and the palms in particular enormous; a four-ounce jar was nothing in that capacious fist. The next moment he was plodding steadily forward on his mission.

Herrick at first followed. Then a noise in his rear startled him, and he turned about, to find Davis already advanced as far as the figure-head. He came, crouching and open-mouthed, as the mesmerised may follow the mesmeriser; all human considerations, and even the care of his own life, swallowed up in one abominable and burning curiosity.

"Halt!" cried Herrick, covering him with his rifle. "Davis, what are you doing, man? *You* are not to come."

Davis instinctively paused, and regarded him with a dreadful vacancy of eye.

"Put your back to that figure-head, do you hear me? and stand fast!" said Herrick.

The captain fetched a breath, stepped back against the figure-head, and instantly redirected his glances after Huish.

There was a hollow place of the sand in that part, and as it were a glade among the cocoa-palms, in which the direct noonday sun blazed intolerably. At the far end, in the shadow, the tall figure of Attwater was to be seen leaning on a tree. Toward him, with his hands over his head, and his steps smothered in the sand, the clerk painfully waded. The surrounding glare threw out and exaggerated the man's smallness; it seemed no less perilous an enterprise, this that he was gone upon, than for a whelp to besiege a citadel.

"There, Mr. Whish. That will do," cried Attwater. "From that distance, and keeping your hands up like a good boy, you can very well put me in possession of the skipper's views."

The interval betwixt them was perhaps forty feet; and Huish measured it with his eye, and breathed a curse. He was already distressed with labouring in the loose sand, and his arms ached bitterly from their unnatural position. In the palm of his right hand, the jar was ready; and his heart thrilled, and his voice choked, as he began to speak.

"Mr. Hattwater," said he, "I don't know if ever you 'ad a mother ——"

"I can set your mind at rest: I had," returned Attwater. "And henceforth, if I might venture to suggest it, her name need not recur in our communications. I should perhaps tell you that I am not amenable to the pathetic."

"I am sorry, sir, if I 'ave seemed to tresparse on your private feelin's," said the clerk, cringing and stealing a step. "At least, sir, you will never pe'suade me that you are not a perfec' gentleman. I know a gentleman when I see him; and as such, I 'ave no 'esitation in throwin' myself on your merciful consideration. It *is* 'ard lines, no doubt; it's 'ard lines to have to hown yourself beat; it's 'ard lines to 'ave to come and beg to you for charity."

"When, if things had only gone right, the whole place was as good as your own?" suggested Attwater. "I can understand the feeling."

"You are judging me, Mr. Attwater," said the clerk, "and Gawd knows how unjustly! '*Thou Gawd seest me,*' was the tex' I 'ad in my Bible, w'ich my father wrote it in with 'is own 'and upon the fly leaft."

"I am sorry I have to beg your pardon once more," said Attwater; "but do you know, you seem to me to be a trifle nearer, which is entirely outside of our bargain. And I would venture to suggest that you take one—two—three—steps back; and stay there."

The devil, at this staggering disappointment, looked out of Huish's face, and Attwater was swift to suspect. He frowned, he stared on the little man, and considered. Why should he be creeping nearer? The next moment his gun was at his shoulder.

"Kindly oblige me by opening your hands. Open your hands wide — let me see the fingers spread, you dog — throw down that thing you're holding!" he roared, his rage and certitude increasing together.

And then, at almost the same moment, the indomitable Huish decided to throw, and Attwater pulled the trigger. There was scarce the difference of a second between the two resolves, but it was in favour of the man with the rifle; and the jar had not yet left the clerk's hand, before the ball shattered both. For the twinkling of an eye, the wretch was in hell's agonies, bathed in liquid flames, a screaming bedlamite; and then a second and more merciful bullet stretched him dead.

The whole thing was come and gone in a breath. Before Herrick could turn about, before Davis could complete his cry of horror, the clerk lay in the sand, sprawling and convulsed.

Attwater ran to the body; he stooped and viewed it; he put his finger in the vitriol, and his face whitened and hardened with anger.

Davis had not yet moved; he stood astonished, with his back to the figure-head, his hands clutching it behind him, his body inclined forward from the waist. Attwater turned deliberately and covered him with his rifle.

"Davis," he cried, in a voice like a trumpet, "I give you sixty seconds to make your peace with God."

Davis looked, and his mind awoke. He did not dream of self-defence, he did not reach for his pistol. He drew himself up instead to face death, with a quivering nostril.

"I guess I'll not trouble the Old Man," he said. "Considering the job I was on, I guess it's better business to just shut my face."

Attwater fired; there came a spasmodic movement of the victim, and immediately above the middle of his forehead, a black hole marred the whiteness of the figure-head. A dreadful pause; then again the report, and the solid sound and jar of the bullet in the wood; and this time the captain had felt the wind of it along his cheek. A third shot, and he was bleeding from one ear; and along the levelled rifle, Attwater smiled like a red Indian.

The cruel game of which he was the puppet was now clear to Davis; three times he had drunk of death, and he must look to drink of it seven times more before he was despatched. He held up his hand.

"Steady!" he cried, "I'll take your sixty seconds."

"Good!" said Attwater.

The captain shut his eyes tight, like a child; he held his hands up at last with a tragic and ridiculous gesture.

"My God, for Christ's sake, look after my two kids," he said; and then after a pause and a falter, "for Christ's sake. Amen."

And he opened his eyes and looked down the rifle with a quivering mouth.

"But don't keep fooling me long!" he pleaded.

"That all your prayer?" asked Attwater, with a singular ring in his voice.

"Guess so," said Davis.

"So?" said Attwater, resting the butt of his rifle on the ground, "is that done? Is your peace made with Heaven? Because it is with me. Go, and sin no more, sinful father. And remember that whatever you do to others, God shall visit it again a thousand fold upon your innocents."

The wretched Davis came staggering forward from his place against the figure-head, fell upon his knees, and waved his hands and fainted.

When he came to himself again, his head was on Attwater's arm, and close by stood one of the men in divers' helmets, holding a bucket of water, from which his late executioner now laved his face. The memory of that dreadful passage returned upon him in a clap; again he saw Huish lying dead, again he seemed to himself to totter on the brink of an unplumbed eternity. With trembling hands he seized hold of the man whom he had come to slay; and his voice broke from him like that of a child among the nightmares of fever: "Oh! isn't there no mercy? Oh! what must I do to be saved?"

"Ah!" thought Attwater, "here is the true penitent."

CHAPTER XII

A TAIL-PIECE

On a very bright, hot, lusty, strongly blowing noon, a fortnight after the events recorded, and a month since the curtain rose upon this episode, a man might have been spied praying on the sand by the lagoon beach. A point of palm-trees isolated him from the settlement; and from the place where he knelt, the only work of man's hand that interrupted the expanse was the schooner *Farallone,* her berth quite changed, and rocking at anchor some two miles to windward in the midst of the lagoon. The noise of the Trade ran very boisterous in all parts of the island; the nearer palm-trees crashed and whistled in the gusts, those farther off contributed a humming bass, like the roar of cities; and yet, to any man less absorbed, there must have risen at times over this turmoil of the winds the sharper note of the human voice from the settlement. There all was activity. Attwater, stripped to his trousers and lending a strong hand of help, was directing and encouraging five Kanakas; from his lively voice, and their more lively efforts, it was to be gathered that some sudden and joyful emergency had set them in this bustle; and the "Union Jack" floated once more on its staff. But the suppliant on the beach, unconscious of their voices, prayed on with instancy and fervour, and the sound of his voice rose and fell again, and his countenance brightened and was deformed with changing moods of piety and terror.

Before his closed eyes, the skiff had been for some time tacking towards the distant and deserted *Farallone;* and presently the figure of Herrick might have been observed to board her, to pass for a while into the house, thence forward to the forecastle, and at last to plunge into the main hatch. In all these quarters, his visit was followed by a coil of smoke; and he had scarce entered his boat again and shoved off, before flames broke forth upon the schooner. They burned gayly; kerosene had not been spared, and the bellows of the Trade incited the conflagration. About half-way on the return voyage, when Herrick looked back, he beheld the *Farallone* wrapped to the topmasts in leaping arms of fire, and the voluminous smoke pursuing him along the face of the lagoon. In one hour's time, he computed, the waters would have closed over the stolen ship. It so chanced that, as his boat flew before the wind with much vivacity, and his eyes were continually busy in the wake, measuring the progress of the flames, he found himself embayed to the northward of the point of palms, and here became aware at the same time of the figure of Davis immersed in his devotion. An exclamation, part of annoyance, part of amusement, broke from him, and he touched the helm and ran the prow upon the beach not twenty feet from the unconscious devotee. Taking the painter in his hand, he landed, drew near, and stood over him. And still the voluble and incoherent stream of prayer continued unabated. It was not possible for him to overhear the suppliant's petitions, which he listened to some while in a very mingled mood of humour and pity, and it was only when his own name began to occur and to be conjoined with epithets, that he at last laid his hand on the captain's shoulder.

"Sorry to interrupt the exercise," said he, "but I want you to look at the *Farallone.*"

The captain scrambled to his feet, and stood gasping and staring. "Mr. Herrick, don't startle a man like that!" he said. "I don't seem someways rightly myself since —" he broke off. "What did you say, anyway? Oh, the *Farallone,*" and he looked languidly out.

"Yes," said Herrick, "there she burns; and you may guess from that what the news is."

"The *Trinity Hall,* I guess," said the captain.

"The same," said Herrick, "sighted half an hour ago, and coming up hand over fist."

"Well, it don't amount to a hill of beans," said the captain, with a sigh.

"Oh, come, that's rank ingratitude!" cried Herrick.

"Well," replied the captain, meditatively, "you mayn't just see the way that I view it in, but I'd 'most rather stay here upon this island. I found peace here, peace in believing. Yes, I guess this island is about good enough for John Davis."

"I never heard such nonsense!" cried Herrick. "What! with all turning out in your favour the way it does,—the *Farallone* wiped out, the crew disposed of, a sure thing for your wife and family, and you yourself Attwater's spoiled darling and pet penitent!"

"'Now, Mr. Herrick, don't say that," said the captain, gently, "'when you know he don't make no difference between us. But, oh, why not be one of us? Why not come to Jesus right away, and let's meet in yon beautiful land? That's just the one thing wanted; just say 'Lord, I believe, help Thou mine unbelief!' and He'll fold you in His arms. You see, I know; I been a sinner myself."

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